Writers Unblocked 2013

Purdue University Calumet
Student Creative Writing and Photography
2012–2013

Writers Unblocked

The best student creative writing and photography

2012–2013

Purdue University Calumet
Department of English and Philosophy
Department of Communication and Creative Arts

Printed by Lithographic Communications, LLC
Munster, Indiana

This is the seventh edition of poetry, fiction and creative non-fiction from creative writing students at Purdue University Calumet. All work in this volume was written by students enrolled in creative writing classes in fall 2012 and spring 2013. We are pleased again this year to feature photography from students in Professor Tom Roach's Location Photography class. We are proud of the creative accomplishments of our students, and grateful to the College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences, and to the Departments of English and Philosophy and Communication and Creative Arts for supporting this journal. Thanks especially to Dan Dunn, former Dean of LASS, for establishing *Writers Unblocked* as a college priority, and to the current Dean of LASS, Ron Corthell, for continuing that support.

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Carousel

Savanna Chiang

6 AM – I wake to an otherwise empty bed. I lie for just a couple more minutes and wait to begin the day. Then, after a few more moments, I get up, get out, and begin the everyday usual: trudge to the bathroom, stand in front of the dismal mirror, look at the sad, sad face staring back at me, and brush my teeth – twenty-five times in circular motions the upper row and twenty-five times in circular motions the bottom. Spit, don't swallow, and turn off the cold running water. While in the shower with the hot water pouring down, running through my hair, into my half-open, half-closed mouth, I pause for a second and think, "I'm a thirty-five year old, full-grown man still following in my father's footsteps, wallowing in his shadow." I'm going to be late; I rinse off, get dressed, and leave.

During the long, slow drive to work, I fiddle with the knobs and buttons, browse and search through all the random, seemingly nonsensical radio stations, trying to find something, anything, I like. I pause and stop – smooth, funky jazz and R&B – soft, smoky, and with a sudden sense of sadness. I like it. The song soon fades away and ends. I look over, and, shit, the girl sitting in the car next to me is kinda really cute. She turns and looks; I immediately look away. Be nonchalant, act as if you never even saw her, noticed her. Red flashes green, she didn't even notice me.

Pull up. Park. Get out. Begrudgingly trudge into office. I can see my dismal reflection in the office window, a sad, sad face staring back at me. 8 AM. It's bright; the sun is shining, and the sky's a cloudless mass of deep, rich cobalt blue.

"Good morning, Jil! How are you this morning?"

"Good morning, Milton. I'm good, and how are you? It's actually sunny and warm. Did you sleep last night? You look tired – you know, more tired than usual."

"Oh, I'm fine. Yeah, the weather's looking fantastic."

"First day of spring. Your first appointment's in thirty."

"Whose is it?"

"Tawny Wilson – someone new."

"Great. Thanks, Jil."

"Mhmmm."

Mhm - the casual, nonchalant reply of my bland, but reliable secretary, Jil – currently, the only consistent woman in my life. I think Jil may actually really like her job, even enjoys it. I mean – I pay her well, and she gets health benefits too. I guess she's satisfied with her life, happy. But, she's also thirty and still unmarried. But, then and again, that's just me judging her based on preconceived societal notions. I can smell her perfume – vanilla, common and trite, the safe favorite of every other girl who wishes to smell of and give away the scent of subtle feminine sweetness.

My 8:30 comes in – young, slightly scared, and nervous. They all are when it's their first time. It's an awkward profession, but someone has to do it: The perennial favorite of my dad whenever someone asks if he truly, actually likes it. Jil tried really hard to make the office like home – more comfortable, less awkward. But, nonetheless, it still smells of detergent and harsh chemicals under the guise of a vanilla plug-in air freshener. Just like home.

"Hi, I'm Dr. Milton Smith."

"Errr, uhm… Hi, I'm Tawny Wilson."

She's small and blonde with bright eyes and nice

teeth, just like the girl I went on a date with sometime last week. And, as I explain the steps of procedure and engage in meaningless small talk and put on my tight, rubber gloves and go, "This may sting just a bit," the room spins and flashes and turns into a dark, dimly lit swanky, upscale restaurant, and Tawny disappears and transforms into a small, thin, blonde-highlighted girl of twenty-nine – a lawyer with a slight power complex and possible cosmetic enhancements. Her breasts look too good to be true. Maybe it's just the dress; she's also bra-less.

"Hi, I'm Milton."

"Hi, I'm Kristen."

"My friends call my 'Tiny.'"

"Oh, how cute. Where did that come from?"

"Well, let's just say I'm not tiny anymore."

She rolls her eyes and giggles. I think it's cute. Nonetheless, I still look around. There are couples smiling and laughing, giggling while gazing into each other's eyes, and couples bored on their phones, not looking at one another, not even talking. And, here I am paralyzed with some sort of captivated fear but also bored out of my mind.

"What do you do?"

"Oh, I'm a gynecologist."

"So, you like vaginas?"

All day, every day. I mess with the female anatomy, the forbidden fruit that leads to human reproduction, the continuation of our species. Yet, I can't even "close" a simple first date. I respond to fear with even more fear, and I also live in an existentialist state of constant ennui. I don't even know what "existentialist" means, but Kristen likes that word. Maybe I'll call her tonight.

* * * *

The tires squeal and suddenly slow to a grinding halt. Just beyond the horizon is the blurry, nondescript – but familiar – outline of a gas station. "Finally," thought Milton. He put the car back into drive and continued along the beaten road. It's barely past dawn, and the light morning dew of summer's mist cools the air. What a perfect morning. With the windows down and music loud, Milton takes it all in.

It's easy to get lost within it all, speeding, cruising on a virtually empty road. The blur of the desert sand passing by becomes nothing but a cascading flood of just browns and beiges, and the wind rushing through the open window smells of a fresh, cool breeze. Milton drives for mile after mile, his eyes occasionally wandering to the passing sight of cacti and coyotes, while his hands – still relaxed – are loosely gripping the steering wheel.

He finally reaches the gas station, a small, measly establishment of just two pumps and no car wash. His Audi is in dire need of one, its icy silver metallic body now coated with a brown, dusty layer of grit, but Milton doesn't mind. He used to, but that type of unnecessary worrying fades away after years of caring just a bit too much and not having it result in anything useful but paranoia and fear. He goes in, pays, and walks out with a couple candy bars and a coffee. The attendant didn't have change for a fifty, but he was a nice, older man with a few laugh lines and a crooked smile – something refreshing from the usual sight of Botox faces and veneer mouths of back home.

There's a roadside diner next door, and instead of skipping another meal for snacks and easy fast food, Milton stops and goes in. It's modest but moderately filled to the brim with truckers and travelers – those with nowhere to call home and those who don't want to go home. A light roar of chatter fills the room, and

old fifties music is playing from the jukebox in the corner. Milton's seated at the counter. The couple next to him is young and exhausted, annoyed at their little boy who's running around and screaming. The mom yells at him to "Come here!" and "STOP! Now!" But he doesn't listen, so his father grabs him, grips him by the wrist, and yanks him over. While sipping his coffee, Milton overhears them reprimanding the boy. They're embarrassed, asking their son why he can't just behave, be like the neighbor's boy who's only three months older but already well-behaved, obedient, and polite. Reminds Milton of his own father, always disappointed, detached, and despondent.

Milton's meal arrives. It doesn't take much to make eggs and toast. The bacon's a bit too burnt, but Milton doesn't complain. The coffee, his meal, and the tip – everything – cost less than ten dollars anyway. The girl seated next to him smells of flowers and patchouli – an odd combination with a delightful twist. He looks over, and she winks and smiles. She looks like Kristen, his ex-girlfriend of a year and a half. It's been a while, and he hasn't seen her in a few months, but he can still vividly recall the softness of her hair, the lone freckle on her hip, and how she bites her lower lip when she's nervous. He remembers the last conversation they had before he just packed up and left:

You're leaving?!

I don't know… I just don't want to be here anymore. Every day's the same, a variation of the same old thing. You know – I'm just not all that happy.

…

And that was it, the end to their long charade of being in some sort of love. "She's young, smart, and wildly attractive. And, can actually support herself without your help. What is wrong with you?" Those were his father's last words when Milton told him he was no longer seeing Kristen because he needed a break.

Milton thought back to all the time he spent with Kristen, a year and a half - eighteen months, 548 days, 13,140 hours. Eight months after that appointment with Tawny Wilson, in which he called Kristen back, she moved into his apartment. 6 AM every morning, he'd wake up next to her still sleeping face, examine her naked beauty in all its glory, and revel in the fact that she was his. 11 PM every night, he'd lie down next to her, graze his fingertips over her soft, warm skin and match the sway of his hips with hers as their bodies slowly collided. But, after more than a year of the same thing over and over again, Milton became restless, bored. The fire within him that Kristen lit began to die down and fade.

It's easy to be happy when you're given everything and have it all going for you, but what's the point of that – to be satisfied with just being happy. From birth I had a set path all laid out for me. An education at the school my father went to. Inherit and run his business. Meet this wildly attractive, amazing girl. Life was easy, maybe I actually was really happy. But, it's not about just being happy, satisfied. I want more. And with that, Milton ate the last bit of his toast, drank his coffee, and tipped the waitress. He ignored the sudden stare and sly smile of the cute girl sitting next to him, smiled at the little boy sulking on the barstool, and left. He got in his car, browsed through the endless array of meaningless radio stations, gave up, and, instead, embraced the music-less melody of just plain silence.

* * * *

6:18AM. The sudden rush of a passing car speeding by, going about ninety to ninety-five, causes a dust cloud to erupt and engulf Milton's car. Milton wakes up in the backseat of his car, parked on the side of

the highway. His body is covered in a cold, cool sweat. He pulls himself up, glances at his phone, and ignores the thirty missed calls and forty-five unanswered texts. In the bleary dimness of the overhead light, Milton pulls out a notebook and digs for a pen to scribble down the words…

I snapped… I just snapped. I guess I was in just too far deep, and when the ocean tides came, I couldn't swim fast enough far away. I was drowning; I couldn't breathe. I didn't want to be tied into something, a relationship, I couldn't cut myself out of.

I guess I'm afraid of commitment, the long haul. Six months was like six years. But I still think about you every ten minutes, a thousand thoughts a day - from the curve of your lips to the soft sway of your hips. It's crazy that who makes me the happiest can also make me the saddest.

I like my independence – sitting inside on sunny days, my face glued to the computer screen, wallowing in my own lonely pool of sadness. I liked being alone, but you showed me I was lonely. You like bright days and white lights and the idea of "us."

I can't explain. It's like the sky is falling. I'm just trying to catch myself. The seasons are changing; I'm falling for you.

Why am I just sitting here, in the backseat of my car, all alone by myself, writing to myself? Milton started the car and drove off. Lightning struck; thunder rolled through the sky. Arriving at a truck stop, he filled his car with gas and walked to the men's bathroom to wash his hands. Dirt and sand were caked into the cracks of his sweaty palms after the countless days spent driving through the desert. While rinsing off the soapy suds, he looked up and saw his reflection in the mirror, studied it – a dirty, tired man staring back at him. His red, puffy eyes were surrounded by a mass of dark circles. "I need to go back... home," he thought.

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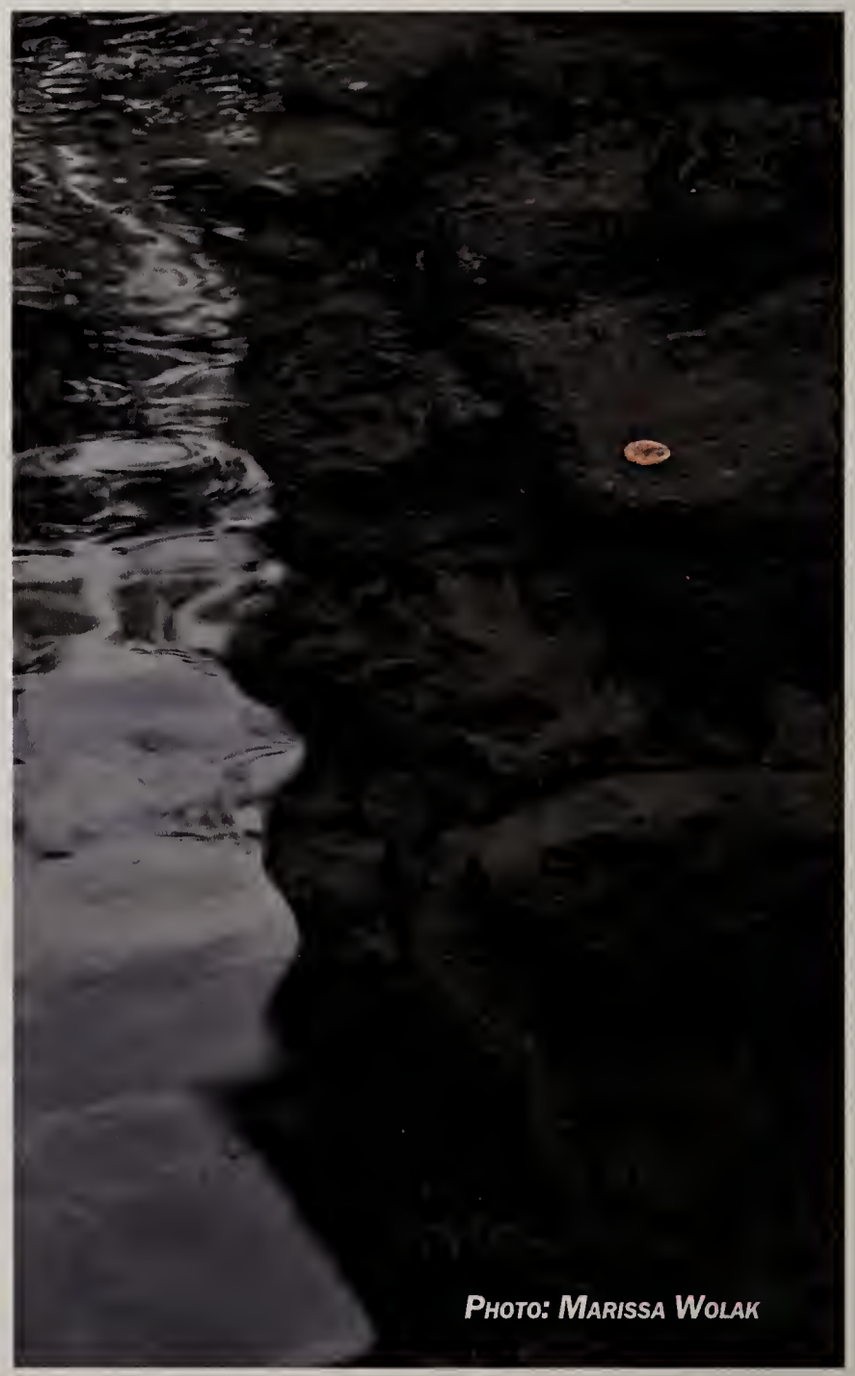

Photo: Marissa Wolak

Why I Love the Mall

Virginia Eib

I love the Mall. I love the contrast of the green and white tile, the cleanly swept floors, and the wide-open spaces. Each store is a new opportunity to create a different reality; perhaps I need running shoes, or I want a pink bedroom, or I am fresh out of bindings, and need a stronger pine-scented air-freshener. The giant grid of walls and leases keeps everything in its place, neatly, all assembled out for my benefit, my perusal, all under my dominion. I marvel at the great contrast between vast open space, and succinctly sectioned lots, each completely dedicated to unique goods and services. There are 132 rooms, all the exact same size, all perfectly laid out, and within each space, a completely unique concept. Euclid himself could have designed no better.

Yet more than geometrical or architectural appreciation draws me to this bastion of 1980s consumerism. It is within these surroundings that I find myself most able to sate my most primal urges. Here, amongst the stucco walls and porcelain tile, beneath the plexiglass skylights and fluorescent lighting, I can best stalk my prey. I creep slowly through the crowds, drifting along the currents, listening through the muffled din of voices for a suitable candidate.. The come-and-go faces drifting like snowflakes in front of my eyes, and into fantasies of decapitation and goblets of blood. I lay in wait amongst the reeds, waiting for one to stray from the group. I spring cat-like with a gift for gab, a shortened hemline, or an inappropriate amount of cleavage. I cast appropriate bait for the day's particular taste, and my victims come following to chloroform car ride, and unnatural, savage death.

I have heard that truck stops provide similar hunting, though the same can be said of any gathering grounds on the fringe of society, and while I can't argue with the reasoning, I do fail to see the fun in picking such easy game as the lost souls hiding along America's interstates. No, for me, the real sport is in selecting a mark in full-view of a thousand people, luring a morsel that has every opportunity to simply walk away. I may select my prey, but the real skill is in making them choose me.

I hate the food court. I hate the crowds that converge upon it. I am repulsed by those who seem to haplessly wander there . It is a dumping ground, a respite for disregard and the smell of manufactured waste makes me ill. I am repelled by the sight of it. I walk quickly past it, never pausing to even consider hunting there. Besides, people feel comfortable when they eat. I am not comfortable amongst these people.

I like to pause in the various department stores situated along the outskirts of the main concourses. I walk past the make- up counters. I prefer to purchase my cosmetics online. However, when considering accessories, it is true, there are two kinds of people and I am a handbag person rather than a shoe person. I consider color first, before texture and optimal organization. I envision scenarios where I will need to carry specific items and make selections based on stock levels. I hate Coach hand bags. There are so many of them and they all look the same. I prefer a look that is more unique and discernible, especially to a trained eye like mine. I appreciate attractive items that lack commonality but still possess boldness while employing restraint. Besides, they can seldom resist the shiny things…

"I love your bag," she says to me as I pass her while she looks at hats and scarves. "Where did you get it?"

She is my age, maybe a few years younger, and she wants me to see she is engaged. Her nails are manicured. Her jacket appears tailored and her jeans are too small. She is heavier now than is normal for her frame. The bra she is wearing is too small for her breasts and the resulting side bulge is pronounced. She is also unaware of how one is to walk correctly in heels. Her boots are pristine but they are vinyl and the wear appears consistent with walking heel to toe. I wonder if her mother knows where she is right now. I bet she doesn't know how to walk correctly in heels either. How tragic.

"Oh, thanks," I say, then taking a guess, "I got it at Prime Outlets, Clearance." She tells me she loves Prime Outlets. I tell her about a coupon online. Then I move to the ring. It usually seals the deal. "When are you getting married," I ask her. "That ring is amazing!"

She tells me what I already know. That it just happened. That he just asked her. She talks for ten minutes about this and then we chat about how hard it is to plan a wedding. She comments on my manicure and seeing my ring, asks me how my husband proposed. I draw her in with some Harlequin tripe I read last week.

"Oh my God," she exclaims, "really?" She asks me how long I have been married. I tell her, and move on to dresses. I show her some pictures in my cell phone. She wants to know more about who did my dress. I tell her about a place near the mall that doesn't exist and am not surprised when she doesn't call my foul. I tell her my girlfriend works there and that she should give my name should she ever want to call to schedule a consultation. She takes out her cell phone to add the store information to her contacts. I tell her it's easier to go in person than to call. And then instead of giving her directions, she agrees to walk with me to the west parking lot so I can point to her its location. Together we walk and talk. I revel in the knowing of what is to come.

I wait. She talks. I don't listen. I care about the intricacies of how I am to wrap up the final details of this particular shopping excursion. I explain to her that we should first walk to her car, then drive together to my car so she can follow me to the dress shop. She takes the lead and I follow her accordingly. She talks. I don't.

There is no consideration in what she is saying, no thought, "chitchatchitchat-newfriend-blahblah." It is possible she would choose her words more carefully if she knew they were to be among her last, but experience has taught me that such is not the case. The last few seconds are always among the most annoying. I don't begrudge someone their last words, but I do get so tired of hearing the same conciliatory rambling and begging. Between work, keeping up the house, and the kids, I am all too seldom granted the luxury of vivisection, and once I set mind to task, no amount of screaming or begging in anguish will stay my blade.

The loud "shuffle-clack" of her walk agitates me more than her silly prattling. I can feel her walk beside me. She is overcompensating for being slightly heavy and those too-high heels and too tight jeans are causing her breasts to bounce heavily. She crosses her arms to hold them down, and her steps become louder. She is not unattractive, but she attracts the wrong kind of stares. Her awkward trusting nature is what forced my bag into her field of vision in the first place.

She drives a red coupe. The scrunchie on the gearshift strengthens my resolve as I direct her to my car. Her presets are a mix of country, hip hop, and top forty all jumbled together and I despite my best efforts, I am growing impatient. "Lot B" I tell her, and if she were not so foolishly oblivious to her surroundings, one glance in my direction would likely convince her that all is not

well. I can see the blood streams trace her bound, white flesh in images of what I know to come. There is laughing horror in my mind as I point out the minivan.

There are some samples in the van that she really must see. She is too heavy for me to carry to my car, so I will need her to walk part of the way. She leans in the door to look in the back seat at the fabric and plastic I pre-arranged that morning. I slide my hand into my bag and draw out the small, white linen handkerchief and the spray can of ether I keep for just such occasions.

Contrary to Hollywood myth, ether and chloroform are not instantaneous anesthetics. However, when used in conjunction with forearms developed by Pilates, weigh-training, and the new Psychotica 360 work-out, certain chemicals and choke-holds are quite effective.

Three minutes later, as I am awkwardly stuffing Miss Amber Isnomore into the van, I am disturbed by Sponge-Bob Square-pants: Austin loves Mommy's new ringtone. "Hey Hon, just wrapping things up here… Yeah, the meeting ran a little late…No, I should be home in about forty-five minutes. ..alright, let me talk to him…Hi Baby! Tell me about school!...Two stars! Wow, Mommy is so proud of you!...Oh yeah? Cookie dough, huh? Okay, Mommy will get some on the way home… Alright, baby, tell your sister that Mommy loves her. I will see you soon. Bye, bye, baby."

As I finish wrenching her into the car, one of her breasts finally pops unceremoniously from its inadequate confines after having threatened to do so all day. No matter, in a few moments, when she comes around, modesty will be the least of her concerns. I will have to make this quick, I've got a little boy who earned two gold stars today, and a husband who can barely make himself toast.

§

Doors

Jason Schultz

Chapter 1: The Decree

As the man set down his chisel, he let the aroma of freshly cut pine shavings wash over him. It was a scent he savored, especially at this hour. Lying on the well-worn shop bench were the planks he had spent the last several hours shaping and milling, ever carefully cutting and stripping away excess matter, working his skilled hands over the raw wood until it began to resemble a familiar shape. With passion and precision he had rendered the wood, giving it life, giving it purpose. This was to be his masterpiece, his legacy; and soon the work would be finished and speak for itself. His leathery hand returned to the hilt of the chisel, a craftsman's tool for a craftsman's hand. He surveyed his work carefully and at length, his gaze drawn to a spot towards the middle of his creation. With no hesitation, he hammered out a small chunk of wood with the chisel, afterwards sanding the area smooth until it was uniform, perfect. The young man backed away from the bench as a tear escaped from his burning jade eyes.

"It's finished." He said to himself, not quite believing his own words.

By making the final cut, he had already sealed his fate, but in his mind and his heart the price he would inevitably pay would be worth it. He had built his final door.

The work of the day had almost been finished, and he found himself alone with his tools and his thoughts. An old, rusty boom box played Credence Clearwater Revival from some dusty corner of the shop, but John Fogerty's crooning ruminations on whether he had ever seen rain were lost in the dim incandescence of the workshop, its sacrosanct silence drowning out the old song. Outside, the cool autumn air hung briskly in the nascent veil of evening shade, and the only light for blocks was the red and blue neon flicker of the shop sign. "Doors," it said in its garish, yet somehow comforting way, "Custom crafted for all your needs."

The green eyed man reached for an unassuming can on the stock-shelf behind him. It was old, the destructive nip of oxidation had begun to turn the lid an unhealthy patina of yellow and orange, but a quick shake was enough to convince him that the contents of the can were still good. He removed the lid, and poured the thick cerulean liquid into a tray. His brush skimmed the surface of the paint, and he began to make strokes on the surface of the door. Soft, calculated, gentle, hand and brush moved in tandem, not once betraying the care from which he went about his task. When he was finished, he positioned the door on the drying rack and cleaned his tools. Although he wouldn't be using it again, he sharpened his chisel as he did every night, and placed it on his tool belt. As he walked over to the electrical outlet and unplugged the ancient stereo (Tom Petty's journey to chase down a dream cut short tonight), he gazed out the small window at his flickering neon sign, and further to the moon set behind it. He let out a sigh, unplugged the sign, and walked towards the door, the same one that years ago had been his first. The tumblers turned in the lock and it was done. The night greeted him as it had many times before, and he started home.

The quiet stillness of the twilight was palpable, and the dimly lit pathway he took home every night was well worn and unaffected by the bustle that was surely still prevalent in the city several miles away. There, he liked to think, there were at least a few people left that could

appreciate the stillness of the night. People who could pull themselves away from their LCD screens long enough to gaze up at the night sky and wonder. Those who still found a desire to create something from nothing, to challenge the limits of imagination and to not blindly accept the constraints that society had placed upon them. If there weren't, he feared, then his society's need to consume would in turn consume itself, and the hope of a better day was already lost.

As Blake Fleet walked towards the Downtown sector, towards his humble apartment and his bed, it seemed to him that the activities of the day had not yet subsided. Messengers frantically ran door to door eager to tell anyone who would listen of the new Decree that the State had just made. A group of citizens hovered near an electronics shop as the news bulletin made clear that the regular State programming schedule would be interrupted for a special message from the Chancellor concerning Decree 437. The sidewalk seemed to be alive, bristling with excitement and nervous wonder at what the decree would be, and how this latest change would affect all of their lives.

State life, most would say behind closed doors and in trusted company, was far from perfect; but the Administration had kept their families safe since the end of the Last War and that was enough to secure their obedience, at least for now. They looked past the kidnappings and politically motivated killings, inconveniences swept aside in service of the greater good, a means to an end. For all the immediate postwar talk of a world free of the machinations of madmen and their inherently greedy designs, the utopia that would be had stepped in to fill the void: its message of unity a ray of hope for the bruised and bloodied masses. But as it often does, the hunger for power corrupted the Administration, and utopia remained a sweet song on the page; a tune that begged to be played but was destined to die on the parchment, never to taste the wind.

A test pattern flickered on the television screen in the store window, and an announcer introduced the Chancellor. He was a vision of stoicism, a stout and barrel-chested man who had the presence of a God, a fitting quality considering he fancied himself one. The man who several decades ago had been a failed novelist and Bureau of Motor Vehicles clerk in the Old World was now the most powerful man in the country. Swept up in a struggling movement that needed a leader, he took charge during the War, and became the voice of those who had been oppressed for so long under the Old Ways. Having tasted power, this man, whose name had been lost to history, became the embodiment of everything he had once stood against. Here, on this flickering screen in the window of a dirty electronics shop in the heart of the capital, he resembled the monsters that he had so vehemently slain years ago. History had repeated itself in this place, a cycle coming full circle, and truth and purpose here was merely conjecture. The pages of this novel were being rewritten with each passing day.

"Friends and countrymen," the Chancellor boomed, "I come to you today with news of a Great Change that must come our way, a Decree which I deem necessary to provide the security and prosperity that has come to define our great nation. It has come to my attention that there are certain elements present within our collective that would seek to undermine the great progress that we have made together since the War. This troubles your humble Chancellor greatly, friends, the very idea that there are those out there tonight plotting to bring about once again the very chaos and misfortune that those of us who survived those harrowing times re-

member all too well. I have bore witness to children dying in the blood-soaked streets of Old Chicago, to families torn apart by allegiance to antiquated creeds in their death throes, I even killed my own brother for taking up arms against our humble Administration. Friends, I will not let this chaos consume us once again because of the whims of madmen. I will not let the future of our great nation be called into question because a few anarchists want to watch our civilization burn. I will not let the subterfuge and conspiracy that takes place behind closed doors jeopardize the promise that so many of our loved ones died for, the promise of a new day that claimed the only woman I ever loved."

The master orator wiped a carefully composed tear from his left eye.

"And this desire to preserve our progress brings me to the Decree, which I have issued and signed as of this afternoon and that will go into effect immediately, upon the culmination of this broadcast," the Chancellor continued. "We cannot hope to exist together as a community, which remains the best hope of humanity in restoring the promise that we can survive, rebuild, and even flourish after returning from the brink of extinction, if we are not transparent. To that end, I hereby abolish those walls that would seek to divide our great family, our great society. By Decree 437, I abolish all doors within this nation. Let our aims be known to all men within the bounds of this great land, and let those who would seek to destroy the promise of brotherhood and equality be exposed for what they are; let those deeds which would be done in the dark and under lock and key be brought to the light. The Administration is peace. The Administration is solidarity. The Administration is unity. We will not falter, friends. For this time, the shackles of history will not lead us down another dark path, and the door to chaos is one we will never have to open. I bid you farewell, and in the Chancellor's name, may unity guide you and peace find you all. Goodnight."

As the Chancellor finished his speech, cheers rang loud from the city streets. Citizens who just a moment ago were intently watching the bald man on the screen, their gaze collectively transfixed on the passion at which the speech had been given, grabbed hatchets, screwdrivers, and whatever else they could find, simultaneously and instantaneously going to work ripping, chopping, and unscrewing any door in sight. The city square became a massive bonfire, as timber removed from thresholds across the city proper made its way to the growing conflagration. On the streets, the State Police held vigil, guns and swords in hand, monitoring the crowd for signs of dissent and refusal to carry out the terms of the Decree. It was a symbolic gesture, but Blake was sure that they would use the weapons if any unfortunate souls resisted.

He hadn't seen anyone refusing to remove their doors on his stroll home, but he knew they were out there somewhere. This event had been building for a long time now, and he had anticipated as much out of the Chancellor, especially as his behavior had grown more and more erratic over the past several months. All around him, people were destroying their doors, the same doors, many of them anyway, that he had made it his life's work to build and perfect. Seeing his work destroyed so unceremoniously filled Blake with an untold sadness, but it also galvanized his resolve. He knew what had to be done, and that began with him getting home.

As he walked into the opening that used to be the main entrance of his apartment building, his thoughts

shifted to a man who lay tossing and turning in bed across town, a man who didn't yet fully realize the role he would play in the events that were to unfold in the coming days. The success of the plan ultimately relied wholly upon this man, although he wouldn't realize it until the moment when the decision must be made. Blake walked to his door and unlocked it, swinging the heavy green work of art open and walking through. He paused for a moment before closing it, and then replaced the lock once more. They would be coming for him soon, and he knew it. He was counting on it. And when they came to get him, they would come to see that Blake Fleet was much more than just the humble carpenter who made those illegal, evil things (as they were sure to be called in some "history" book) called doors. Yes, Blake Fleet was much more than just a carpenter, and he had the ability to make much more than mere doors. Blake Fleet, leader of the resistance, made doorways, a fact that would become apparent for the Administration very soon. For although doors in the Nation were now illegal, there would be at least one that remained on its hinges tonight. It was with this door that his plan would begin, and the flames of revolution would ignite.

The blue-eyed man awoke early that morning, so early that some would still call the veil of heavy blackness outside night. It was a recurring dream, and this had been the fourth week in a row that he had experienced it. The periphery may have changed, of this he wasn't too certain. But the focus of the dream was always the same: a blue door. The brass knob twisted, firmly and without pause, and as the cerulean door began to swing open, a radiance that simultaneously filled his heart with terror and joy began to creep through the threshold and into the room. Or was it a field of flowers? Or the peak of a great mountain? He couldn't be sure where he had been this time, but he was sure that he was awake now, firmly entrenched in the viscera of this white-gray hell.

His bed sheets were wet with sweat, although the early autumn air was brisk, and the windows open to let in the gentle breeze. Tossing and turning, he rose from his failed slumber and hobbled to the bathroom, reaching blindly for the faucet handle until his soft, boyish hands found purchase. He twisted until he felt a cold stream gush from the tarnished nickel. A few splashes of cool water were enough to force the rest of the bleary red haze from his vision, and he returned to the modest living quarters. Although he was thoroughly tired, his dreams would elude him for the rest of the dark hours, and he knew it. There hadn't been much sleep since the Decree had been made, not for him. He wondered when the day might come when he could get his state-recommended eight hours a night. He wondered if it would come at all.

He flicked the light on, and the fluorescent lamps flickered and buzzed to life. A mirror across the room caught his gaze as he put on his white-collared dress shirt and black suit pants. The starched collar of the shirt made the silver glimmer of the capital A pin on his breast stand out against his slim, immaculate figure and his menacing silhouette cut grimly against the cold stainless steel of the appliances and furniture in the apartment. He looked into the mirror with a cold stare that seemed to dissect his own visage with surgical precision. Steel blue eyes pierced the feigned sterility that had overtaken this shell and taken this man hostage what seemed like so long ago. He hadn't liked himself for quite a while, but this was really an understatement and he knew it. He hated himself, and he looked upon his reflection with the intense gaze of a witness at a mur-

derer's execution. A single tear left his eye and landed on his pale cheek, and with a burst of pure aggression, the steel chair that had been just a moment ago straddling the small table where he took his meals had taken flight across the room, shattering the mirror in one violent, ugly blow.

He fastened the final button on his collar and walked over to where the shards now lay on the hard linoleum floor, looking down into the thousand tiny portals his rage had created, seeing himself in every one. When he looked into them he didn't see Anton Davski, heralded hero to the Administration and second in command. He only saw a broken, hollow man, a conduit of broken dreams and wasted years. How many people had he watched die? And for what, the propagation of a corrupt government that had lost its way?

They were just using him to further along their lies, using his name and his former glories as a means to their ends. He had played along, mostly because until now he hadn't felt like he could do anything about what this world had become, one man in a massive organization of liars and killers. They would kill him in a second if they knew what his true intentions were, now that he had all but severed the shackles that they had kept upon him these last fifteen years. Anton knew that he was a dead man and he had slowly come to terms with the reality of his situation in the last few months. After all, killers had existential crises too, and this one had seen enough bloodshed for ten lifetimes.

He knew one thing, however: if the plan was to be enacted, and if he was to really go through with it, then the chances of him ever leaving this city were slim to none. He had made peace with death, but somehow he knew that there was one thing that he must do: he must find the door in his dreams. For in Anton Davski's weathered heart, he knew it was real, and it was out there.

§

Photo: Marissa Wolak

While Waiting

Venus Dabney

Winds were blowing, moving trees that at first glance seemed unmovable. The streets were clear of all traffic; strays surfaced from the trash and had their way with the town. As Claire looked out of the living room window, the street light caught the shadow of the familiar black and white alley cat running down the walkway. Waiting for a phone call, Claire paced nervously in front of the love seat, sharing glances between the window and the phone. She wondered what the call would be like; if it would go as she planned or would her reaching out be one of the biggest mistakes of her life. What if he was out of her life because he was undeserving of her love and caused her more bad than good? All she had were questions and a worried heart to pass the time, sleep was no option.

She continuously paced, hands became warm from the vigorous rubbing of one another that took place, Claire took one more look at the phone and then the clock.

Just as she started to reach for the receiver to check that it was working properly the phone rang, startling Claire so, that she almost knocked the end table over. Luckily, she caught the corner with her knee, looking like someone from America's Funniest Video submission and was able to catch the receiver before it hit the floor. She grabbed the phone barely with enough breath to utter any sounds she managed to whisper hello.

Voice recognizably shaky, still startled from her table rescue, she attempted to sound calm, "Hello" she muttered again.

A voice on the other end, mysteriously deep in tone responded.

"Is this the residence of Claire Moore?" he asked.

Silence met the stranger on Claire's end of the phone. She answered yes in a voice only she could hear. She stood in the middle of the living room, frozen at the end table, and held the receiver clutched in both hands as if it weighed a ton.

"Hello, hello… Is anyone there?" he asked.

"Yes, this is she," she said with a sudden rise of confidence.

"Hi, this is Paul, I believe you called for me earlier?" he said curiously.

This was her time, a moment she needed to cherish. It had been a conversation she had longed for. She had rehearsed what she would say when this moment came, but it was here and she found no words. Eyes beginning to fill with tears, fighting to hold them back, trying to keep that confidence and calm demeanor, she failed and exploded with emotion.

"Daddy!...Daddy, it's your daughter," she said before she could help it.

Still crying, she waited to hear his reaction. She took a deep breath to regain herself. As she went to speak once more, she heard silence then all of a sudden the silence was broken by the slam of the receiver on the opposite end.

Claire stood there momentarily and held the phone, then hung it up as a single tear ran down her cheek. "Undeserving it is," she muttered to herself and sat on the loveseat and continued to stare out into the night.

§

Elements Incarnate

Chris Rinald

Book One: Fire

It was a wide, dirt alleyway, essentially. The alleyway was lined either with small shacks or with small stands that stood as shops, all of which were made of wood. It was buzzing with people, all going about their daily business. You could occasionally find children running across in play, or a farmer chasing an errant farm animal that went astray. Otherwise, people went about their business, mostly either gossiping or bartering.

In a clearing between the closely-packed shacks and stands, somewhere near the middle of the village, there was a man. He was an old man, about 5'11", bald at the top of the head with hair starting at the ears and hanging about halfway down his neck. He was fit, especially for an old man. He was wearing a ragged tan tunic and matching pants, held up by rope used as a belt. His name was Alexander Barov.

Barov was doing something rather peculiar at the moment. He was wielding a piece of wood that resembled a short sword. In front of him was an apparatus also made of wood. It looked like a wooden post, with a few long arm-like protrusions sticking out of it. Barov grabbed one of these protrusions and pushed it, and the whole post began to spin. He then held up and outward the wooden sword and stepped within reach of the arms of the post.

As Barov stepped within reach, he began to fend off the wooden attacker. Each time an arm threatened to hit him, he would deflect it with his weapon, pushing away with enough force to send the post spinning in the other direction at the same speed. As time went on, he pushed harder and harder, spinning the post faster and faster. What posed an even greater challenge was the arm toward the bottom of the post. Barov could only dodge the bottom arm by jumping over it, leaving him open to another arm if he didn't hit the ground fast enough. The whole time, it was evident that Barov did not seek to practice striking back, but only to deflect. He continued with this mock battle for some time.

As this went on, a young man and his friends walked down the alleyway of the village. The young man looked to be about nineteen, maybe twenty, years of age. He was tall, with long, flowing blonde hair and broad shoulders. He kept his chest puffed out as he walked, and his strut held a sort of confident (or perhaps arrogant) swagger about it. The man wore a tight, well-knit blue tunic and matching pants. As he reached the middle of the village, he looked to the side to see Barov going about his training. He stood and watched him for a few minutes, as if he were amused by the old man's activity. He then began to walk towards Barov, friends in tow.

"What do we have here, boys?" the young man yelled with a mocking grin on his face. "Oi, old man, whaddya think you're doin'?"

Barov gave the post one final, forceful block, stopping the post from spinning and making a loud CRACK! He then turned to the young man and said, "Talking to you, now, I suppose." He walked towards a rack that was behind him, full of different kinds of imitation wooden swords, and placed the one he was holding in the empty space meant for it. Barov had not a drop of sweat on his face, nor did he seem out of breath.

The young man laughed. "Don't you think you're a lil' old to be playin' with wooden swords? Or any swords, for that matter?" His friends chuckled behind

him in agreement.

"Don't you think you're a little young to know that, boy?" Barov replied, unaffected by the young man's mockery.

The young man's smile turned into a frown at Barov's rebuttal. "Perhaps a duel will prove you wrong, old man. What say you?"

Barov continued to smile. "As it might you," he replied. "If it's a duel you want, I'll be happy to oblige." He stepped aside and made an open gesture at the rack of wooden swords. "Choose your weapon."

The young man quickly walked up to the rack and grabbed the right-most sword. It was a large one, meant for two hands. As he pulled it off the rack, he nearly dropped it; he hadn't expected a sword made of wood to be so heavy (or rather, so close to the real thing). He adjusted, then stepped back to allow Barov to pick his weapon.

Barov saw the weapon the young man chose and chose one in response. He picked up a hand-and-a-half sword.

"A bastard sword for the indecisive old man!" The young man mocked.

"I think you're mistaking indecisiveness for waiting to decide," said Barov. "That can be a grave mistake."

"We'll see," replied the young man.

The men both faced each other and took a few steps back. Both of them were holding their swords down in a lax position, the young man's set onto the ground due to its size.

"Don't think I'll be going easy on you because of your age, old man," said the young man, grinning.

"It would be pointless if you did," replied Barov with a half-smile. "Let's begin, shall we?"

"Let's," agreed the young man. Swords at the ready, the young man gave a battle cry and charged.

The young man brought the sword over his head and finished his charge by swinging it with all his might down onto Barov. Where he thought his wood would meet flesh, however, it instead produced a cloud of dirt. Barov had sidestepped the young man's charge.

The young man quickly lifted his sword and swung it around in a 360-degree counter-clockwise motion. Barov dodged the young man's whirlwind-like attack by dropping to the ground. With Barov on the ground, the young man saw an opening, and with a triumphant cry swung around again, bringing his sword overhead and slamming it with all his might to the ground.

Again, the young man's blow was met by a cloud of dirt. Barov had rolled to the side just in time. He rolled backwards and shot upright, sword at the ready again.

"Awfully quick for an old man, aren't you?" said the young man in jest.

"I tend to favor agility over brute strength," replied Barov with a smile.

"Until you get caught, of course," the young man said. "Then you're no more than a rat in a trap."

Smiling still, Barov said, "Fortunately for me, I don't intend on getting caught."

"We'll see about that." The young man lifted his sword and charged Barov once again.

He brought his sword down, and again Barov dodged. The young man didn't pause, however. He unleashed a flurry of blows. Slash after slash, he attempted to cut down the old man, not pausing for a second. With each attempt his cries became louder and his breathing more shallow.

The young man's onslaught didn't seem to faze Barov, however. He managed to avoid each blow with ease. Most of the young man's attacks he avoided by

raising his sword and stepping aside slightly, allowing the young man's blade to slant off of his and to the side. The more particularly nasty ones, however, he avoided altogether.

When the young man realized his attacks were futile, he disengaged Barov, stepping back and ramming the tip of his sword into the ground, which he then used to lean on. The young man was panting heavily, worn out by his own attacks.

Barov watched the young man and called out, "Perhaps you'd like to take a break!" Barov still wore his smile as he said this.

Seeing Barov's demeanor infuriated the young man. Brimming with rage, he stood up, lifted his sword again, and gave one final charge, roaring in anger. This time, the young man would not end his charge with a slash, however. Instead, he held his sword in front of him and attempted to lunge at Barov with what strength he had left.

What ensued ended in a manner of seconds. When the tip of the young man's sword reached Barov, he made a clockwise turn, dodging the lunge. As he turned back, he grabbed the hilt of the young man's weapon and stuck his foot out at the same time, tripping and sending him face-first into the dirt. All of this was done in one swift, effortless motion.

The young man, on the ground, tried as quickly as he could to get on his feet, but it was too late. Barov threw aside the young man's sword and was already upon him. He held out his sword, the tip extending out to the young man's neck. The young man glared at Barov with a mortified anger.

"Perhaps," Barov said, "you should not use anger as a weapon. It clouds your judgment." Barov took his sword away from the young man's neck and lowered it. "At any rate, that was a good duel." He extended his hand to the young man, offering to help him up.

The young man, still angry, pushed Barov's hand away fiercely. He got up on his own, turned and stormed away, each furious step releasing dirt into the air. As he walked away, people he passed made way for him, trying not to step into his raging path.

"Someone's a sore loser," quipped Barov as he bent over to pick up the sword the young man used. "Perhaps you two should follow him and make sure he doesn't hurt anyone in his hissy," he said to the young man's friends, who until now had been staring at the old man with a look of wild astonishment.

The friends both shook themselves of their looks. "Yes, sir, good day, sir," they replied. They ran away in the direction the young man had gone.

Smile still on his face, Barov put the young man's sword away. He went back to his training apparatus, spun it, and began his training again.

As evening began to set in, Barov decided to make his way home. He set his training sword on the rack, and walked down the lane, exiting the village. Soon he veered off the road and began walking through a dense forest.

The forest was thick with trees, leaves green and lush high overhead. The tree trunks were thick and wide, with deep roots that weaved through the ground, covering it where grass and dirt did not. Bustling about were various woodland critters and bugs: squirrels climbing nimbly up trees, bees searching for the nearest flower to land on. In the distance, Barov could see a group of deer grazing in a clearing. Barov took care to tread lightly, not wanting to disturb the creatures.

After about an hour and five miles of walking through dense forest, Barov made it to a small clearing.

In this clearing was a small one-room wooden shack. Outside the shack, the clearing was empty, save a small fire-pit that was used to cook food and a line that was used to dry clothes.

The shack was just as small on the inside as it looked on the outside. There were few possessions inside, and all were barely visible. The only thing providing light at the moment was the small window in the side of the shack, which offered very little due to the sun being blocked by the trees outside.

There was no floor in the shack, only the ground that the shack was built on. On the far side, opposite the door, there was a bed which consisted of no more than a pile of hay and a pillow and blanket. To the right, there was a table with one chair, which served as the dining area. In the center there was a fire pit, which was reserved for use on especially cold nights.

Perhaps the most curious possession of Alexander Barov's, however, was the glass case standing by the left wall. The glass case held one item on display. It was a sword, with scabbard to match. The sword was of excellent craft. The blade was about 3 feet in length and about an inch-and-a-half in width. It was a single-edged sword; the dull edge was flat all the way to the tip while the sharp edge curved towards the tip. The hilt of the sword was exquisite. The cross guard was gold-plated, and the handle was fitted with black leather. The scabbard was made with brown leather with gold at both the locket and chape.

The final touch to this magnificent weapon was the gem that was set at the end of the hilt. It was a beautiful faceted rhombus-shaped emerald, which replaced the pommel of the sword. The gem was completely devoid of impurities. It refracted the small amount of light that came from the window, giving the innards of the glass case a faint green glow.

As Barov admired his precious sword, he suddenly heard a faint rustling from outside. Moments later, he heard a knock at his door.

"Who be ye?" yelled Barov from inside.

The voice of a man answered, "I be he!"

Puzzled, Barov asked, "Who be he?"

The man answered, "He be me!"

"Who—" Barov started. Oh, forget it, he thought. Both puzzled and amused, he made his way to the door and opened it.

Standing in front of him was a man a little taller than himself, wearing a deep blue robe with a white sash. He had a long nose as well as a long face, gray hair, and deep blue eyes. He was holding a simple walking stick, which had runes carved into it, the likes of which Barov could not read.

"Azurius!" Barov exclaimed. "What on earth are you doing here?" They grasped each other's arm in a vigorous handshake.

"Oh, just taking a stroll through the woods," Azurius said. "I heard an old man lives in these woods who knows how to make a cup of tea."

"Your ears did not fail you, friend!" Barov said. "I'll go fetch some water."

*****

After about a half hour of fetching water from a nearby river, fire-making, then water-boiling, the two men sat at the table inside the shack. Barov gave Azurius his only chair, and he had rolled a stump into the shack to use for his seat.

Barov took a sip of his tea, then began conversation. "So, Azurius," he said while setting down his cup, "what really brings you here? You certainly haven't travelled all this way for a cup of tea, no matter how good I

might make it."

"You're absolutely right," replied Azurius, who also sat down his cup. "Besides, your tea is rather dull. You live in a forest, you know. It's not so hard to go and pick a mint leaf or two."

Barov laughed heartily. "Perhaps next time I'll sweeten it with a little poison ivy instead, eh?"

Azurius chuckled. "But yes, down to business," he said, leaning forward onto the table and crossing his hands. "I've heard some rumblings from some old friends of ours, and they're not particularly happy."

"Well if they're not happy, my advice would be to take a new hobby," quipped Barov. "Might I suggest knitting?"

Azurius gave a half-smile. "Well," he continued, "these unhappy friends of ours in particular are actually somewhat upset by you, I believe, or at the very least your description."

"Is that so?" asked Barov. "I don't believe I've been a nuisance, at least not lately."

"It's not so much a nuisance, as an embarrassment, really," Azurius said. "You see, it would appear that a certain son of a well-known individual was bested in a duel rather recently. Earlier today, in fact. And what's more, he was bested by an old man who, he was under the impression, was taunting him. Perhaps you might know something about this?"

"My word, word certainly travels fast, and you're right at its heels!" Barov exclaimed.

"Yes, well, I have my ways. You of all people know how swift I can be, especially with the river to carry me," Azurius said, holding up his right hand with the back of his palm facing Barov.

On Azurius' middle finger, there was a silver ring with a large round faceted sapphire gem. The gem, much like that of the one found in Barov's sword, had no impurities. As it was held up, the light hit it, causing reflections to scatter about the shack. Like the emerald in Barov's sword, it gave a faint glow of blue to the shack, however something was different. The reflections on the wall almost seemed like they were moving, almost as if the gem were a pool of water, rather than a rocklike sapphire.

"Ah, yes," said Barov, "you certainly have your ways. So what of this youngster?" He then joked, "Have I angered the father of yet another young prince? Is another king looking for my head now? I suppose I should really be careful about the people I cross."

"You might recognize the name 'Elduran'," said Azurius, not sharing in Barov's jest.

Barov's smile faded, and they were both silent. Barov picked up his tea and took a sip. He sat it back down and began to speak again.

"I suppose I should have noticed it," Barov said solemnly. "That boy had quite the fiery spirit about him."

"Yes, well now he's gone and complained to daddy, and daddy seems to view your winning the duel as a declaration of war on the family name," Azurius said thoughtfully. "He's quite upset."

"And with good reason!" exclaimed Barov. "Had our blades been metal rather than wood, that boy would have been cut down during his first charge. I suppose that's the Elduran way though: reckless abandonment and tactlessness in battle."

"If you don't rectify the situation soon, Barov, a whole family of reckless abandonment and tactlessness is going to charge your shack and burn it to the ground."

"Well, if that happens, I can always count on you to carry me downriver," said Barov. He then rested his chin on his hand and pondered. "I do very much like this

shack, though. Perhaps I should take care of this before it gets out of hand."

"What do you suppose you'll do?" asked Azurius.

Barov thought a minute. He then stood up, walked over to the glass case, and opened it. He pulled out his sword and examined both sides of it. The sword was light as a feather in his hands. He picked up his scabbard, and sheathed his sword. He shouldered the scabbard, and turned to Azurius, emerald pommel glinting in the light.

"I think I'll pay the Elduran family a visit," Barov said with a smile.

Azurius sighed. "I was afraid you'd say that."

"Perhaps you'd like to accompany me, old friend?"

"Well I'm certainly not staying here," said Azurius in a sarcastic tone. "At the very least, I'll accompany you upriver."

"Very well then, let us be on our way," said Barov, opening the door for Azurius. With that, they exited the shack and made their way for the river.

Barov and Azurius followed the river upstream. The river went straight through the city they were bound for. It wasn't long before the men saw the large walls that separated civilization from wilderness. Therein lay the city of Hearthrynn.

As Barov and his companion closed in on the city, they began to move diagonally towards it. The river under the city walls was barred, restricting entry. They would have to enter through one of the city's gates, of which there were 3: one for each main road leading into or out of the city.

Walking towards the nearest road, Barov examined the city. He had not been in such a large town in a while. He was only accustomed to the solitude of his shack, save the occasional trips to the nearby village for training and sometimes a sparring match when a challenger appeared. Hearthrynn definitely wasn't his most comfortable place to be. Aside from his sort of societal claustrophobia, he wasn't well liked by the Elduran family in the first place (although no one else was, either). The recent events only made things worse, and the family of Elduran held high power in the city of Hearthrynn.

Hearthrynn was a city primarily run by the military, and the house of Elduran controlled the military, meaning the Elduran family basically controlled Hearthrynn. Barov could see the keep from which the Elduran operated poking out above the city, the sun right above it. It would be dark by the time his business was finished.

The two old men reached the eastern gates of the village. Two guards stood on either side of the gates, dressed in the standard-issue Hearthrynn Guard uniform: an open-faced iron helmet that covered the bridge of the guards' noses, thick leather boots and gauntlets, and shirt and pants made of silvery chain. Above their chainmail shirts they wore a black tabard, bearing the Elduran family crest: a red dragon, eyes menacing, maw gaping wide. Inside the mouth of the dragon was a pristine, square-cut ruby. The dragon's fangs overlapped the ruby, holding it firmly in place. Illustrated in the center of the ruby was a roaring fire, as if it were coming from the dragon itself, attempting to burst through the crimson gemstone.

Barov and Azurius greeted the guards as they walked past. In passing, one of the guards addressed Azurius.

"Azurius! Sir Elduran's been lookin' for you!" he said.

"He need not look any further," Azurius replied, "I was just out running an errand, and I'll be seeing him

now."

"Very good, sir."

Barov and Azurius continued down the main road of the city. There were plenty of people walking through the city, on their way home as the sun continued to sink into the inevitable night. The city itself looked well enough; the road was well-paved, and shops and stands lined the streets all in excellent condition. The people, however, seemed troubled. There was little talking from the townsfolk, and seldom a smile could be found as Barov scanned the faces of those who passed. Guards could be found holding posts in major street intersections. They stood still, like statues made of flesh. With the keep blocking the sun more and more, the mannerism of the population gave the appearance of an overall gloom blanketing Hearthrynn. The effect was unsettling to him.

"Azurius," Barov began to inquire, "is there a funeral?"

"No," Azurius said, looking at Barov with a puzzled face. "What in the world would give you that impression?"

Barov reciprocated the look of confusion. "Never mind," he said. They were about to reach their destination, and he didn't feel like explaining himself.

As they came upon the keep, Barov was almost disgusted at the sight. The keep was not modest by any means. It must have been 20 stories high (the spire, at least), with a width and length that was at least a quarter of the length of the city walls. As with the city's gates, the gates were again guarded by two guards. These guards wore the standard uniform, however there were slight differences. Where the previous guards' chainmail was a silvery color, these guards wore pure black. Their tabards had a gold outline, and they held their weapons at their sides: a large halberd, taller than the guards themselves, with the tip reaching almost twice the guards' height.

As Barov and Azurius approached, the guards walked towards the center of the gates and turned to their visitors.

"Halt, who goes there?" The guard on the right asked.

"'Tis I, Azurius, and a, er… A friend, yes a friend."

"A friend?" Asked the other guard, casting a wary eye over Barov. "I don't recall anyone being on Sir Elduran's guest list, Azurius."

"Yes, well—"

"Believe me, my friend," Barov chimed in, interrupting Azurius, "Sir Elduran will surely have me on his guest list." He then added with a smile, "If you don't believe me, go ask him yourself. Tell him the Windy Wanderer says 'hello.'"

The guard on the left leered at Barov. "Very well," he said. "I'll return shortly."

He banged on the gate twice, and the gate opened, granting him passage. The gate closed behind him. Barov and Azurius waited, Barov sitting on one of the steps leading up to the gate, Azurius leaning against his walking staff at the bottom of the steps.

After a few minutes of waiting, the gate began to open. Azurius stood upright, and Barov stood up from the step that served as his chair. The guard stepped out of the keep. Under the guard's eye, there was a mark that Barov did not notice before. It was a patch of seared flesh, a spot that had just been burned. The part of the guard's helmet that met the burnt flesh also had a black scorch mark on it that wasn't there before the guard left.

"Let them in," the returning guard said, giving an angry glance at Barov.

The guards opened the gates and allowed Barov

and Azurius to enter. As they walked up the steps, Barov saw the expression on Azurius' face become solemn. As he passed the guard that had heralded his arrival, he took one more glance at his newly charred face. He had a good idea of what had caused the abrasion, or who had caused it, rather. Barov's demeanor changed; he was no longer smiling.

Barov and his friend had now entered a long hallway. The walls were made of stone, holding torches which lit the room. The wall was also adorned with portraits, mostly of men, who Barov presumed to be previous heirs of the Elduran household. In the center of the floor, a large red carpet with golden trimmings led down the hallway. Barov followed the carpet with his eyes until they reached the end of the hallway.

"There he is," he said under his breath.

At the end of the hallway, a man stood alone. He wore a fine crimson shirt made of silk, with tannish leggings and boots made of fine black leather. The boots made a soft thud on the carpet as he walked to meet Barov and Azurius.

"Gamalt Elduran!" Barov exclaimed, matching Gamalt's pace to meet him. "I never thought I'd have to see you again."

"That's likely the only sentiment we share, Barov," Gamalt replied, brow furrowed.

The men met in the middle of the hallway. Barov examined his host up close. Gamalt was taller than Barov by a few inches, and had much more muscle on him as well. He had short black hair combed forward, stopping above his eyes. His left eye had a rather peculiar scar on it; It began at the left side of his eye, and curved downward, reaching his rather pronounced jaw.

"I believe we have something to discuss," Gamalt said, head lowered while still maintaining eye contact with Barov.

"That's certainly what I've been told," Barov jeered back at Gamalt

The men said no more. Gamalt led Azurius and Barov down the hallway to the next door. Barov watched Gamalt walk, shoulders broad, chin up, hands behind his back. From there, the hallway split off into several corridors. They continued down the main hallway through two more doors. Eventually they came to a stop at a door to the left. A guard stood watch at the door.

"Don't just stand there, let us in!" snapped Gamalt to the guard.

"Yes, sir," the guard replied obediently.

The guard opened the door, and Gamalt stepped in first, then Barov, then Azurius trailing behind. The guard shut the door behind them.

The room was large, and mostly empty. The walls and floor followed the same stone scheme that the rest of the keep was built on. Scattered about the walls were torches, but the walls also held a few oddities. A large map hung from one wall, with dots painted on it in certain areas. From the opposite wall, a rack of weapons hung. The types of weapons hanging ranged from short-swords to long-swords to flails. In the remaining wall, opposite the door, there was a fireplace, freshly stoked and crackling as it consumed the wood fed to it. In the center of the room, there was a long table, with two rows of chair on either side, and one large chair at the far end. On the table, another map was spread out with small figurines scattered about it. Barov knew all too well what this room was: The Elduran War Room.

"Somehow," Barov said, walking towards the table, "I find this place fitting to hold our conversation in."

"Isn't it?" Gamalt agreed, walking to the fireplace. He stood in front of the fireplace, hands still behind his

back, staring into the fire. The fire cast a silhouette of his body on the rest of the room.

Gamalt continued, "Azurius, where have you been?"

Azurius pulled out one of the chairs, turned it towards Gamalt and sat down, crossing his fingers together and holding his staff between his legs. "I was taking a stroll, sir. Walking is a great way to clear your head." He threw a quick glance to Barov. "I happened upon Barov during my stroll, and thought I might inform him about the impact of his recent activities."

"That must have been some stroll you took," Gamalt said, turning his head just enough to make the side of his face visible. "As I recall, our friend, the 'Windy Wanderer,' doesn't do much wandering anymore. I also seem to recall him being quite far off in the thick of some forest."

"Do you doubt his legs?" Barov asked with a raised eyebrow.

Gamalt spun around furiously. His voice rose, "DON'T get snide with me, Barov." He walked to the head of the table and leaned on it with his hands. A lit candle on the table sat directly under him now, setting shadows amidst the crevices of the man's face. Gamalt didn't look so old, perhaps even younger than Barov. He did, however, look seasoned, like a man who's been aged by strife.

Voice lowered, Gamalt continued to speak. "I'm sure Azurius has told you what you've done by now." His voice still held ferocity as he glared straight down the table at Barov.

"As a matter of fact, he has," Barov began, copying Gamalt's table-lean. "Apparently, I dueled a young man and won. It would appear that his loss is some fault of mine, rather than his lack of skill with a blade."

In a fit of rage Gamalt picked up the candle under his head and slammed it down onto the table again. As he did so, his voice raised again. "OF COURSE HE'S NO GOOD WITH A BLADE! He's young and nubile, and he has much to learn. All you did was parade that in front of the townsfolk!"

"If someone wants to spar, I spar with them," Barov said in a matter-of-fact tone. "If they're not as skilled as I am, they lose. No harm is done in losing a clash of wooden swords."

"Unless you're the son of a well-known military family," Gamalt said, squeezing the bridge of his nose with pointer finger and thumb. He leaned back on the table. "Then everyone loses confidence in the family of the loser."

"Then perhaps you should train him better," Barov rebutted.

"Oh, PLEASE!" Gamalt spat. "We both know you had an advantage in that duel," he hissed, pointing at the sword at Barov's hip.

Barov looked down at the emerald sticking out from the scabbard at his hip. He rested a hand on it, smiled and looked back up at Gamalt. "I assure you," he stated, "this had nothing to do with my victory. Reckless abandonment was his downfall."

"Bah!" Gamalt sputtered. "I'll have none of these lies."

"If I might interject," Azurius blurted out, standing up, "I'd like to tell a short story. Perhaps it will give you two time to calm down."

"What, Azurius?" Gamalt snarled.

Azurius leaned his staff against the table and pulled off his sapphire ring and held it up for the other two to see. "Would either of you be interested in hearing the tale of the Four Gems?"

Gamalt sneered. "We already know that story, Azurius. We both bear one of the four gems you speak of."

"Just indulge me, would you?" Azurius pleaded.

"Fine," Gamalt sighed, impatiently. He pulled a chair out and sat. Barov did the same.

"Excellent," Azurius said. He then began his story: "As you both know, centuries ago two nations erupted into a massive war. This war lasted for five years, and was devastating. Not only did innocent people get hurt, but the world itself was thrown off balance. Fires from burning houses and funeral pyres spread to the forest, filling the air with strangling smoke. Blood, waste, and mangled bodies blackened the rivers. Even the soil was tarnished by the bloodshed. This went on and on for five years. Eventually, the Elements could take no more. The Elements themselves came forth to put an end to the war and bring balance once more.

Earth created 4 precious stones, to be the agent of the Elements' aid: Ruby, Sapphire, Emerald, and Amethyst. The Elements each poured a portion of their being into a gem, giving them the power to control each element. Each gem was given to a different person, two on one side of the war, and two on the other. This way, there could be some sort of balance.

With the gems in their possession, the Element-Wielders banded together to end the war. After doing so, they made it their duty to repair the damage that had been done to the world, as well as maintain the elements from then on. They would pass on their gems to their heirs, and in doing so pass on their duties as Element-Wielders. Such is the story of the Four Gems."

The room was silent for a moment. Gamalt then stood up and walked back to the fireplace. Above the fireplace, a large sword hung. It was a claymore, slightly larger than the usual kind. The hilt was plated with gold, with a leather strap fitted onto the handle. The center of the cross-guard extended slightly onto the blade. In the center of the cross-guard, a large square-cut ruby was set.

The ruby, like the gems that Azurius and Barov held, was perfectly made. It was almost transparent. It had an unusual glint to it; It reflected the light given from the torches around the room, but it almost appeared as if the flames emanated from inside the gem instead, giving the flames an eerie, ghost-like appearance.

Barov stood, and slowly pulled out his sword. He held the sabre with the blade pointing to the floor, and gazed into the emerald.

"Air…" he murmured.

Azurius put his ring back on, and looked down at the cool sapphire.

"Water…" he mumbled.

Gamalt reached up and retrieved the claymore from its resting place. He took a moment to peer into the bold ruby set in the sword.

Gamalt gave an abrupt, fierce cry and swung the large sword down in the direction of the table. As he did, a torrent of flames taking the form of his slash erupted from the sword, hurtling towards Barov. As they did, the table absorbed some of the fire, leaving the other half flying towards Barov.

Still holding his sword underhand, Barov gave a might upward slash with his blade. From it, a gust of cool air propelled straight into flames. The flames dissipated in the air, leaving only hot cinders to fall. The cinders fell directly onto the map.

Azurius gave a gasp. "Oh dear!" he exclaimed. He procured from his robe a small vial. The vial was filled with what appeared to be water. He uncorked the vial as

quickly as possible. He waved his hand above the vial, as if he were trying to pick something up that was in the vial. The water followed his gesture, and he made a motion with his hand towards the cinders, which had already begun to sear into the map. The water flew into the direction he pointed, and landed on the map, dousing the cinders.

Gamalt was still hunched over, grasping his sword tightly. He stared intently at Barov. "I don't care much for this storytelling, and I don't care much for you, Barov. You've brought shame upon the name of Elduran, and I intend to rectify that."

Barov matched Gamalt's stare. "How do you propose you'll do that, Gamalt?"

Gamalt stood up straight, not once dropping his gaze. "You and I are going to have a duel. A duel to settle our rivalry. Permanently."

"Are you suggesting a duel to the death, Gamalt?"

"It's not what I'm suggesting, it's what I'm demanding."

"I'll have none of this 'duel to the death' business, Gamalt." Barov sheathed his sword. "That's simply barbaric."

Gamalt held his sword horizontally, pointing it straight at Barov. "I don't give a damn if you refuse. Either way I intend on killing you, I'm simply letting you choose how it ends."

Barov put his hand around the hilt of his sword and gripped tightly. He wasn't ready for a fight, but he might have been out of options.

Just then, Azurius spoke up.

"E-excuse me, if I may interject once more…" he stammered.

"WHAT IS IT NOW?!?" bellowed Gamalt. The fire of the torches as well as the fireplace roared higher for the instant that Gamalt raised his voice.

"I was just thinking that, perhaps it would be a good idea to make the duel public," Azurius said, raising a finger.

"Why do you say that?" asked Gamalt, still fuming. He lowered his sword.

"Well," began Azurius, "the point is to remove the shame brought by your son's duel, which was done in public. If you were to duel Barov in public and win, then any doubts that were created by watching your son's duel would be removed."

Gamalt considered Azurius' proposal for a moment. "Azurius," he beckoned.

"Yes, sir?" Azurius answered.

"Leave the room. Now."

Azurius cast a worried glance towards Barov. He then bowed his head to Gamalt. "Very well, sir."

Azurius picked up his staff and slowly exited the room. After Azurius left, Gamalt took a moment to collect his thoughts before speaking.

"After considering Azurius' idea, I believe that would be the best course of action. What say you, Barov. Will you accept my challenge?"

Barov looked down, still holding his sword. He struggled; No matter what, he couldn't avoid confrontation. He finally answered Gamalt.

"I suppose I have no choice."

"Very well, then. One month." Gamalt turned and placed the sword back on its rack above the fireplace. He kept his body turned towards the fireplace, placed his hands behind his back, and began to watch the fireplace again.

Barov walked with his head down in quiet contemplation towards the door. He opened the door, then stopped. He turned his head slightly towards Gamalt.

"In one month, it ends," Barov said solemnly.

"For your sake, I hope it does," Gamalt replied.

Barov shut the door behind him, leaving Gamalt to himself. Gamalt went back to the head of the War Room table and sat in quiet reflection, alone.

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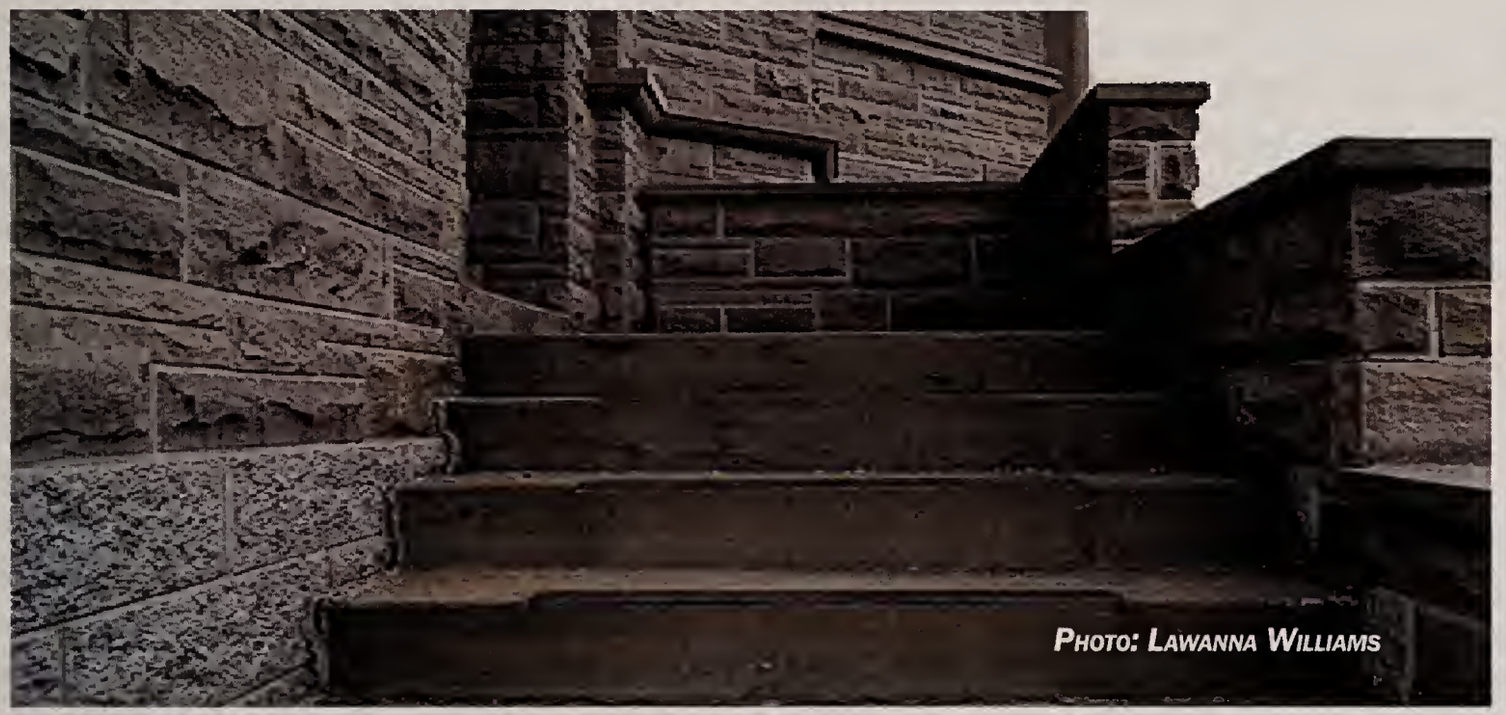

PHOTO: LAWANNA WILLIAMS

Two More Shots of Tequila

Dominic Garcia

Nathan stood in front of his closet staring at his color coded wardrobe. Black hangers for pants, blue for short sleeve shirts, and white for long sleeve with each section organized in proper order according to the color spectrum. He had spent days scrutinizing his clothes trying to discover the perfect outfit to serve his purpose. He scanned every men's magazine he could find in an attempt to solve his fashion dilemma. Sports coats, trousers, graphic tees, chinos and other such words plagued his mind. When he would come to a satisfactory selection, some trivial flaw would radiate and ruin the whole ensemble. He felt utterly ridiculous spending so much time on the process, but he could think of no other alternative.

At first Nathan fantasized about wearing a suit. The sleek lines of a slim cut three piece suit, tailored of course, would have made quite the statement. There would be no need to utter a single word. She would just know who he had become. The image Nathan saw in his head made him smile with smug self-satisfaction until it faded as reality set back in. Suits worked in cocktail lounges that sold overpriced drinks and spent more money on their decor than most people spend purchasing their home. On a Friday night when worn anywhere else a suit screamed effort or just douchebag, and he knew there was only one place he would find her. Monica was a beer and shots kind of girl. A suit was unfortunately out of the question. Nathan could not afford to appear to be trying too hard.

Time was running out and Nathan had to make a decision. Flight #377 would be departing in just over four hours. His carry-on bag had already been filled with all the essentials. Underwear, socks, and toiletries were meticulously packed away with space left for shoes and the mystery outfit.

"What the hell am I doing?" Nathan muttered to himself, his hands pressed against his face.

A breach had occurred. A sudden crack in Nathan's fantasy and he began to fear the worst. It all seemed so insane, so stupid. All this preparation and effort for a high school crush. A crush that he had had nursed for over six years. Nathan sat on the bed and bowed his head in thought. Deep down he knew that he would never be happy with everything he had if he failed to gain closure. The past slowly trickled into Nathan's eyes causing him to question himself. Was this really worth it? New clothes, a three hour flight, and countless hours of planning? It had to be worth it. He would make sure it was worth it.

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Dunbar's was everything you would expect from a neighborhood bar. The regulars were regular, bathrooms were just clean enough to keep the CDC away, drinks were cheap, and smoke was a permanent fixture just like the plastic marlin on the back wall near the pool tables. This wasn't a hookup spot where sleazy guys picked up drunk girls like lions pick off weak gazelle. It was a place to drink away your troubles or have a laugh with a good friend. It was the kind of place where all eyes follow any unfamiliar face that walks through the door and right now those eyes were on Nathan.

Nathan did not possess a particularly intimidating figure. His height and build were at best average. His face was well shaven and possessed features soft and delicate. No, he was definitely not intimidating. Just out of place.

It had been years since he had set foot in that bar or even that state. He tried to leave it all behind. When you spend your whole life not fitting in, your only option is to try a new puzzle. The bar was dimly lit but still bright enough to accent the clouds of smoke crawling overhead. Nathan tried to scan the bar as the smoke began to slowly feast upon his eyeballs. She wasn't hard to miss, not for Nathan. Sitting at the end of the bar with a beer in hand was Monica. Her dark brown hair cascaded down her shoulders. It was longer than it used to be, but Nathan could overlook that change. She failed to notice Nathan which was good news for him because it was clear to everyone else that he had been looking for someone in particular that night. Desperation can sting the nostrils.

Nathan decided to play aloof. He walked along the far wall to avoid being spotted by Monica then came up to the bar from her blind spot to order a beer. They stood side by side the whole time Nathan praying she would notice him.

"A light beer? Is that what they taught you at that big shot school you ran off to?"

Nathan had to dial back his grin from shit eating to coy. It was not easy.

"They taught me a lot of things. And I didn't run, I flew. Airplane, peanuts, in flight movie horribly edited for family viewing, you know, no big whoop."

Monica's eyes somehow managed to shine that night. The hazel specs of each iris sparkled in the gloom.

"Well, if you would have come down state with me I could have taught you how to drink like a pro." Her pink lips flowed like liquid as she spoke then parted to reveal a glorious smile. She still had that slight overbite.

Everything slowly coalesced. Time jumped back and it was high school all over again. Two stupid teens sitting next to each other in history class lost in their own world. Hours collected at the bottom of empty glasses.

"Two more shots of tequila. In fact, make 'em doubles," Monica pronounced with the tone of a girl who can handle her liquor.

"Wait a minute. You sure you can handle more? I don't want to have to be carrying your drunk butt around."

"Are you trying to call me fat? Cause I can still kick your ass just like I did in sixth grade," she said with a grin. Her memory after eight beers was quite impressive, then again everything she did had always been impressive to him.

"Look, let's just call it a night," Nathan told her as he waived off her order to the bartender.

Monica got up from her barstool only to stumble and fall into Nathan's arms. She didn't rush to regain her composure. Instead she simply leaned against him as he held her in his arms. Nathan suddenly felt warm. He wanted to pull her closer and hold her tightly. Luckily, he started to come to his senses. It was too soon.

"Now I know you've had enough."

"But I'm not done having fun yet." Monica began to pout like a child only to rapidly change expression as if she suddenly discovered the cure for cancer. "I know, how about we just head back to my place and we can watch a movie or something. It'll be fun and I have plenty of supplies in my apartment so we won't lose our buzz."

Nathan, with great effort, maintained his composure.

"Fine, but you better have some good movies. I need something fun to watch. None of that Notebook crap, not today."

"Like I would own that movie."

"Don't lie, I know you have a sentimental side. You've always enjoyed a good chick flick."

"Really, now? I could have sworn it was you that had a thing for romantic comedies back in the day."

"Hey, I can't help it if I'm sophisticated enough to enjoy a good plot."

"Don't you mean a good cry?"

"Jeez, you're a mean drunk. Is this how you treat all you friends who try to show you a good time?"

"Oh, I'm just joking. You know I love you."

Nathan knew she only meant it in terms of friendship, but those words still caused his heart to jump.

"Yeah, well, let's get out of here. I spent enough of my hard earned cash on you tonight."

"And I'm worth every dime."

"Yes, you are. Now, let's go."

Nathan and Monica slowly walked arm and arm out of the bar. Her head rested on his shoulder. It was heavier than he expected. They hailed a cab and were soon on their way back to her place. She held his hand during the entire cab ride and all he could do was slowly feel his doubts melt away. Every time Nathan inhaled he received a clear whiff of her sweet perfume. Even when she unleashed a moment shattering belch, he continued to lose himself.

Nathan thought about the years he spent pining for the girl now nestled at his side. The countless missed opportunities to show her how he felt because he feared making a fool of himself flashed through his mind. Monica had even once tried to ask him out to a high school dance only to be rejected. Standing before her eyes he had simply never felt good enough for her.

They arrived at Monica's apartment just when the liquor truly began to take effect. The moment they were through the door she was out like a light. Nathan was left with the daunting task of navigating an unfamiliar apartment while carrying his passed out prize.

He found her bedroom down a narrow corridor and laid her upon her lavender blanket. Her entire bedroom was decorated with various shades of purple. It made the room surprisingly comfortable. He tried to remember if she had always favored that color but his memories swirled in his alcohol infused brain.

Looking down upon her peaceful face, Nathan couldn't help but wonder if this was his last chance. Would there be another opportunity for him to feel that sensation that he had craved since first laying eyes upon her? Could he simply take it? The fleeting moment in time was his to seize in that moment. There would be no other chance, this he was certain of. He would head home and be trapped in his empty life.

He stared at her, his eyes tracing every curve of her face. She hadn't changed. After all these years she had not changed. He leaned over her. He could practically taste her perfume. Fruity.

Nathan felt her hand slide over his. A smile broke over her face.

"You still are the perfect gentleman," she said laughing.

"You are the God damn devil, woman."

"You just wait and see."

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Nathan waited for Monica to fall asleep. The morning sun had barely begun to rise. He quickly but quietly put on his clothes while keeping a careful eye on Monica's face. She looked so peaceful. He walked over to her and gently kissed her forehead.

Nathan stood on the curb outside Monica's apartment and waited for the cab he ordered. It did not take

long before a yellow checkered car that reeked of cigarette smoke and stale vomit pulled in front of him. He climbed in and told the driver to take him to his hotel and then the airport.

Nathan stared out the taxi window and watched the streets fly by. They had not changed. How long it would be before he bothered to set foot in that city again? As he slipped his wedding ring back on, he wondered.

§

Leathers

Cane Buchmeier

The Dude

It was another cold, bitter night, typical mid-January weather in Chicago. Each time he stuck his arm out of the window it felt like he dipped his hand in a tub of ice. The space was small, crammed, and filled to the brim with old newspapers and fast food wrappers. Not to mention the lingering odor of cigarettes, booze, and worst of all, body odor. Every hour was the same. Someone would drive up, hand him the toll, and then drive off, usually accompanied by a dirty look directed his way. Over and over again it would happen until it became a blur. He'd pass the time by mindlessly stroking his dark beard, which reached the middle of his chest, as he gazed absently into the sky. His eyes were always covered by his dark sunglasses; sometimes he couldn't tell whether it was day or night. This was Pitt "The Dude" Jorgavich's job, and he didn't really like it. But then again, he didn't really like much.

Three A.M. finally came and that meant The Dude's shift was over. Or it would have been had Wanda, a middle-aged black woman, shown up for her shift on time. The Dude waited impatiently, puffing a cigarette and swearing under his breath after each minute passed. Fortunately for The Dude, no cars came by. At a little over 3:15, Wanda finally arrived.

"About damn time!" snarled The Dude as he shoved open the small toll booth door only for it to immediately slam closed.

"I'm so sorry, Pitt! I was--..." said Wanda as she stepped out of her car, but The Dude cut her off before she could continue.

"I thought I told you not to call me that? Call me The Dude, okay?" he replied as he stepped into his car and drove away.

Wanda stood outside of the booth shaking her head as The Dude sped away.

"He's not a happy person."

The Dude trudged up the long flight of stairs in his apartment building that led to his room. The only elevator in the building had been out of commission since well before Thanksgiving. The building he lived in was a dump, but The Dude liked dumps. He couldn't afford anything better anyway. He couldn't even afford this one. He was already several months behind on his rent and his pay from working at the toll booth wasn't cutting it. He took his coat off as he entered and tossed it on the back of a chair. The red light on his answering machine was blinking, and he quickly pressed the button to listen to the playback.

"This is Rick Walter from Rick's Tavern. Sorry to say that we're not looking for any extra help at the moment."

"Well, fuck you then," shouted the Dude.

Message number two was no better.

"Hello, this is Mark Powell from Prime Construction. As I said before, we think you'd fit in well here. Unfortunately, you failed your drug test and we will be unable to employ you at this time."

"I wasted my money on that piss cleanser for nothing?" The Dude screamed as he punched a wall.

The last message caught The Dude's attention.

"It's G. I got a job for 'ya. Meet me at the usual place at 10 tomorrow night."

"Finally, a way to get some cash," The Dude said to himself as a rare smile spread across his face. "This calls for a celebration!" He put his coat back on and headed

down to his favorite bar.

Meanwhile, Wanda tried her best to clean up the mess The Dude made in the toll booth. This was not at all unusual. Every time Wanda took over for The Dude, she'd be the one left to clean up after him. She couldn't believe how one person could fill an area so small with so much garbage. Try as she might, the stench was impossible to get rid of. She eventually got used to it, but by the looks of their faces it clearly enveloped the drivers of each passing car.

Wanda tried her best to get along with The Dude. Initially she suspected that The Dude's animosity towards her was racially fueled. She even sympathized with The Dude's situation, as she was aware of his money troubles, and thought that was largely the reason for his unpleasantness. There had to be more to it, though knowing The Dude she'd never know. Wanda wasn't much better off than The Dude when it came to money, yet she always managed to maintain an affable and optimistic personality. She tried spreading her optimism and kindness to The Dude, but he would have none of it. Race had nothing to do with The Dude's poor treatment of Wanda. She quickly realized that The Dude simply hated everyone.

Just as Wanda had finished cleaning up another of The Dude's messes, a fancy black car with tinted windows pulled up to the toll booth. She couldn't make out their faces, but she could tell that there were at least two people in the car: a driver and someone in the passenger seat. She didn't think anything of it, until the window rolled down and instead of handing her the toll, a man asked her about her co-worker.

"Excuse me, ma'am. Does a big fella with a beard who goes by the "The Dude" work here?" asked the man.

"Yes, he does," replied Wanda.

After telling them what little she knew about The Dude, including what hours he worked, the man in the driver seat bid her farewell and was about to drive off. Wanda hadn't raised the gate and before the car could leave she asked "Why do you want to know, if you don't mind me asking?" The man simply winked at her. Wanda raised the gate and the car drove off. The Dude never gave the impression that he had many friends, so the encounter was a little unsettling. What was even more unsettling was that these men didn't seem like friends of his at all.

"Back again so soon, Dude?" asked the bartender as he wiped a mug clean, filled it with beer, and set it down in front of The Dude.

"Well, Roy, it just so happens that I have some very interesting and rewarding prospects on my horizon," replied The Dude smugly before he took a huge gulp of his beer.

"Oh yeah, what's up?" Roy was used to The Dude coming into the bar and running his mouth about all the illegal activities he participated in.

"Eh, I probably shouldn't tell you," said The Dude.

"Aw, come on! You can't come in here bragging about some "interesting" stuff if you're not going to talk about it," replied Roy.

A few hours and about a dozen beers later, everyone in the place knew what The Dude was up to.

The next day The Dude woke up at nearly three in the afternoon, unsurprisingly hung over. It wasn't something he couldn't handle, however. He was a heavy drinker and alcohol didn't affect him like it would most men who consumed that copious amount. He didn't know what to expect, but he was thrilled at the prospect of earning some extra cash. From his previous experiences with G and his crew, he knew it would be interest-

ing, to say the least. The Dude killed the rest of the day by lounging around his apartment. 9:30 P.M. quickly approached and The Dude headed out to the arranged meeting place: an alley in a rather deserted area not too far from his toll booth. The abandoned warehouse that The Dude was all too familiar with was nearby. G and two of his cronies were already waiting there when The Dude arrived.

"Why don't you come on inside, we've got a project we need your help with," said G as he and his cronies turned their backs and headed inside. The Dude looked down, kicking a discarded bottle as he reluctantly made his way inside.

Something's up…

"So, I hear you've been blabbing about some of the work you've done for me," said G.

"What's this all about? I haven't said a damn thing about nothin'," replied The Dude with forced calmness.

"Bullshit. Word is you get a few beers in ya' then start bragging about who you work for, what you've done. A buddy of mine was at a bar last night, one of the places you hang around at. Why would he lie about this?" asked G.

"How the hell should I know?" said The Dude.

G pointed his gun at the Dude.

You better not try nothin'. You'll be sorry if you do!" shouted The Dude angrily.

"Why? You have no family, friends; no one will miss you," replied G with a laugh.

The Dude rushed G, and two shots were fired.

Wanda was sure to get to the toll booth in plenty of time before her shift started. She didn't want to anger The Dude any more than she had the other day. She approached the toll booth and saw that the small gate was closed, meaning no cars were able to access it. When she reached the door she was unable to open it; something seemed to be lodged between it and the wall. The sight that met her eyes as she peered in through the small window nearly caused her to fall back in shock.

"He's dead! Oh my God, he's dead!" screamed Wanda as she frantically thought of what to do.

With her hands shaking and her palms sweating, Wanda reached into her coat pocket and pulled out her cell phone.

"Hello, this is 911, what is your emergency?" asked the operator.

"He's dead, there's blood all over!" replied Wanda in a panicked rasp.

"Calm down ma'am. I need you to tell me where you are and exactly what happened."

She eventually came to her senses and relayed the pertinent information to the operator and before she knew it sirens in the distance alerted her to the arrival of police cars and an ambulance.

It was those men she thought as she sat on the cement with her back to the toll booth. It had to be.

A few hours after The Dude was escorted to the hospital, Wanda received a phone call informing her that The Dude was not dead, but rather unconscious. The outlook was not good and he was unlikely to last more than a few days.

Wanda was up most of the night with the TV on, though she was not really watching it. She couldn't sleep after what happened. Sure, The Dude was as unpleasant a person as she's ever met, but does anyone deserve that? She couldn't get the image of his blood soaked body lying crammed in the toll booth out of her mind. Also weighing on her mind was the police's request to help them find the culprit. She'd told them everything about

the encounter with the strange men in the car who inquired about The Dude. A description of the driver wasn't very helpful, as he looked like an ordinary person with brown hair. The police agreed that the encounter was odd and definitely suspicious. The surveillance tape was handed over to the authorities in the hope that a license plate number could be identified.

They'll at least know what the car looks like and maybe even catch a glimpse of one of the suspects' faces, thought Wanda. She wanted justice to prevail, if for nothing more than the principle of it. However, she feared for her safety.

Wanda had finally fallen asleep when she was awakened by a loud crash. She sat upright in her bed, listening intently for whatever it was she heard. She climbed out of bed and made her way to the living room, intent on being as quiet as possible. She heard a rattling sound and saw the knob of the front door moving. Without thinking she grabbed a frying pan hanging on the nearby kitchen wall and then flattened herself up against the wall near the door, waiting to strike. Strangely, Wanda wasn't scared. She couldn't be, not after all that happened. She knew exactly who was on the other of the door and she was ready. Suddenly the door burst open and without a moment's hesitation Wanda smashed the intruder directly in the head. His body hit the floor with a loud thump, and before calling the police she pulled off the man's ski-mask to confirm her suspicions; yes, it was the man from the car. The police arrived shortly after.

When Wanda received word that The Dude had finally come to, she made her way to the hospital to visit him. She wasn't sure what she'd say. She didn't bring him a card or anything, she figured that wasn't The Dude's style. When she walked in the room, The Dude was sitting upright in his bed with a cigarette in his mouth and his shades covering his eyes. It looked as if nothing changed.

"Um, I don't think you're supposed to be smoking in here," said Wanda.

"I'd like to see 'em try and stop me," responded The Dude with a dismissive laugh.

"I'm really glad you're okay, Dude," said Wanda, still standing near the door.

"Like I care what you think. But hey, I heard you whacked that bastard in the head with a frying pan and now he's sitting in jail. Ha, good shit. I suppose I 'ought to thank you," The Dude said.

"Well…" Wanda began, but yet again she was cut off by The Dude.

"But I'm not going to. Now I got G's whole crew after my ass. I already killed the other motherfucker when shit got hairy, but now G himself is in prison? I'm a dead man."

Wanda didn't know what to say. She wanted to be shocked, but she wasn't.

"Thanks for nothin', ya' old broad. Now get the hell out of my sight!" hollered The Dude.

Wanda exited the hospital. She then realized that some people, like The Dude, would never change. She didn't hate him though, or feel any negative feelings at all towards The Dude. She simply pitied him. The Dude never did show up at the toll booth for work and she never saw him again.

§

Twister

Stephanie Conway

Clemence walks through the archway leading from the front room into the kitchen, the storm outside transforming the walls that are normally a bright, vibrant, and welcoming yellow, to a sickly green. Although, memories of somehow managing to burn Mac & Cheese on the stove with her mom, laughing their heads off, or sitting around the remains of a Christmas dinner, set off to the side to make room for Scrabble, with her mom and grandfather, ten years before, could not warm her heart.

Clemence places a box of opened letters addressed to her that she had found hidden while cleaning out her mother's closet, on the old oak table. Her eyes are unmoving from the sea of letters in front of her. She shifts in her seat, and then tenses a moment trying to remember when she had sat down.

Her delicate hand supports her head as she chews at the inside of her bottom lip, the taste of blood filling her mouth. Her expression as if she was thinking of something, and it was just on the tip of her tongue but cannot make the connection with her brain.

Having read a few letters already there is something that keeps on itching at her. Every letter she read is different except for two things. The greeting and signature is always the same.

Trembling hands pick up the first letter dated on Nov. 23, 1990, faded from the lack of light, and she begins to read:

Squirt—

Happy birthday! You're a year old now. I know it'll still be a couple of years before you will be able to read this, but I want you to know that I do love you. I know you don't understand, but I just can't be in your life right now. I want to be, more than anything, and one day when you are old enough I promise I will tell you, and then hopefully I can be the father you deserve. Until then.

Love, Dad

Those two words stop time in its place. How could this be? She balls her hand up into a tight fist, her periwinkle polished nails digging into her palm. Her father is dead, her mother told her so.

To think the same woman that had worked so hard her feet would bleed, but never missed a dance recital, soccer game, or band concert, and would dance in the kitchen every morning while making breakfast, despite the fact that the kitchen radio has been broken for years, had deceived Clemence her whole life. She had a warm, loving heart and always gave a helping hand to someone in need, even if some people believed it was an undeserving gesture. She was her mother and best friend, who took this lie to her own grave, while a ghost, her supposed father, rises from believed grave.

Her hand slams down hard on the table, fire crawling up her arm to her shoulder, but she does not acknowledge the ache. Why would she keep something like this from her? How could she keep something like this from her? It's her father! What could he have possibly done to be stripped of his rights to see his own daughter? Why had her mother kept all the letters? Most importantly, why on this earth had her mother kept her mouth tightly sealed about the truth! When she had every opportunity to tell her daughter before pancreatic cancer claimed her life? Hadn't she felt guilty?

At this last thought Clemence sat upright in her seat, the heat in her enraged face draining slowly as she

came to a realization. The night her mother had died she had been rummaging around in the very same closet the letters were hidden. The home nurse had called for her help to get her mother back into bed after attempting herself, but it resulted with getting ten-year-old stilettos thrown at her head. She had rushed home from work and up the stairs as fast as her car and legs could take her to find her mother crouched in the corner of her closet murmuring to herself.

"How long has she been like this?" She asked.

"About two hours." The nurse told her.

"Why hadn't you called me earlier?" Clemence scowled.

"Well, I would have but I was a little busy trying not to get harpooned by footwear." The nurse pointed at the shoe with the heel stuck in the wall behind them. "Got to admit, she's got a good arm."

She scoffed, then walked to the closet, kneeling down to be eye level with her mother.

"Mama?"

She softly stammered, "I have to find it."

Clemence furrowed her brow, "What do you have find?"

"For you."

"What's for me?"

"The box." She began hyperventilating.

"Okay mom, let's get you back in bed."

She reached a hand out to help her up.

"No!" She pulled away and gripped a ratted and torn Nike and reeled her right arm back, ready to launch the shoe into the air.

"Shh, mom it's okay. We will find the box tomorrow. Okay? You just need to get some rest right now. I promise."

It took her a moment, but she put the shoe down and took her daughter's hand. With the help of the nurse, and a little dose of sedatives, her mother relaxed in her blue and white plaid bed.

Unfortunately, she never woke up the next morning, and Clemence knew now that her mother was trying to find this box of letters that now mocks her very being. She denied her mother the chance to clear her conscious that Tuesday night, three weeks ago, which seems like it had happened only hours before.

Thunder crashes and lightning cracks, illuminating the kitchen eerily for a moment, taking her focus from her thoughts to the growing storm as a gust of wind came through an open window she had completely forgotten all about, blowing the letters all around the kitchen. Clemence bolts to the window over the sink, moving the perfectly matching yellow and pink flowered curtains and reaches for the handle to close the window, the latch clicking into place as she locks it shut. She gazes out the window before her, expecting rain, but there is none.

Dark clouds slither through sky from the distance, tearing away at the little sunlight there is left from the beautiful summer afternoon earlier that day. If you didn't know any better, you would think it was smoke rising from a scorching fire. Lightning strikes again and shadows dance around the kitchen. She hadn't realized how dark it had gotten, and reaches to her left to flip the switch on the wall closest to her, lighting the kitchen fan, returning the kitchen to its comfortable glory.

Clemence walks over to the other side of the kitchen and prepares herself a pot of coffee. As it brews she opens the cupboard above her head and sees her mother's favorite mug, they had made together, as soon as the door swung open. Pottery is a pastime they had once shared. She cups it in her hand and stares down

at the metallic purple and pink "tie-dyed" coffee mug. They tried to paint the mug in a way that one color would transition into the other, but it came out splotchy despite their efforts. Her lips curve into a smile that could challenge the sun, as the memory of her mother playfully smearing clay on her cheek floods her mind.

She places the mug down on the sky blue linoleum counter top and walks to the other side of the kitchen near the stove, where the letters had been blown, bends down and begins collecting them to be placed back safely in their box. When Clemence pauses in the middle of her clean-up after picking up a page and two, Polaroid pictures fall face-down out of the folded up letter. On the top right corner of each picture was a year written: 1985 and 1987. She cocks her head sideways, like a dog would when its curiosity piques, and bites down on her sore lip again. She places the letters in her lap and replaces them with both pictures in her hands.

Before turning them over she looks more closely at the years, and finds that they were written in the same handwriting as the letters. They weren't properly preserved. The corners are worn and the pictures are faded. One picture has a tear on its left side.

In the picture dated in 1985 was her mother in her early twenties. Her mother was smiling, the same smile Clemence now carries, except her mother's lips are crimson red in the photo and looks as if she had been laughing at the time the picture was taken. Her chestnut hair falling in loose curls framing her face, she looked happy. She was with a man in the picture, his arm around her neck pulling her towards him, his lips kissing her cherub cheek; he was smiling as well. From what she could see of his face, this stranger was handsome. Could this be the profile of her father?

The other Polaroid from 1987 was taken only of her mother while she was pregnant with her. She stood profile in the photo to show off her baby bump, one hand placed on top of her belly and her other cupped underneath. Her black shirt had been a little too small for her at the time, the bottom half of her belly hung out of the shirt. Her long dark hair pulled back in a bun, her face looking down at her belly. She had no smile on her face in this photo, but Clemence could tell her heart was smiling.

The strong smell of coffee pulls her from deep thoughts and she fills her mug up to the rim, adding no cream or sugar. She sits back down and takes a big gulp, grimacing at the taste, then opens the letter the picture had fallen out of dated on May 14, 2009:

Squirt—

Today is your mother's birthday, and I hope it's a good one. I would send her a card but I doubt that she would accept anything from me. The pictures I have sent you are my favorite of your mother. The first one is the night I met your mother, coincidentally on her birthday, and the other I cherish the most because that is the only picture I have of you. I thought you should have it.

I never told you why I couldn't be there for you and I think it's about time you know. I am not a good man, and I was in jail for the first ten years of your life because I abused your mother while she was pregnant with you. I had been sentenced for fifteen years but I was released after ten years for good behavior.

Your mother loved me with all her heart, even as she watched me turn into a monster. I was foolish then and neglected her. I was an addict and I was always angry, and I took it out on her. It nearly killed her to testify against me and send me to jail, I could tell, but she did it for you. As bad as it is to admit, if it hadn't been for you, your mother and I would probably still be in the same bad

situation. I would still be that monster and she would still be in an abusive relationship.

I know it might be hard to believe when I say that despite my actions I did love her, especially after what she has probably told you. It will be even harder to believe that I am not that same angry guy anymore. I only wish I told or showed your mother how I truly felt about her.

I can never forgive myself for what I did. She almost lost you. I don't know what I would have done if she had. I have loved you from the moment I saw your heartbeat on a monitor screen.

Would you do your old man a favor and give your mother these photos? As I've said, they have always been my favorite out of all the time your mother and I spent together. If you put the two together it's almost like we're a family.

Love, Dad

She sits back in her chair and sniffles long and hard. She is torn and wants to feel sorry for him but at the same time, and like he said, he is not a good man. No wonder her mother fabricated a story about how her father died. She probably wished it were true. But then why keep the letters? She must've read them because every single envelope had been opened at some point, and if she really wanted to keep it a secret, why not just burn them? Clemence picks up the Polaroid of her mother and father and holds it between two manicured fingers, as if it held all the answers.

Clemence leans forward, slamming her palm to her forehead, and rubs her temple with pressure trying to make sense of all of this. She huffs in frustration and gets up, knocking over her chair. Clemence walks to the sink and leans over it, grasping the edge of the sink so tightly that her knuckles turn colorless. She reaches down into the sink, grabs a dirty dish, and launches it at the oven, on the opposite side of the room. Clemence then slinks to the floor, one leg outstretched and the other bent to her chest. Her face is wet and hot, and a terrifying screech, she has never heard come from her mouth before, echoes shrilly throughout the kitchen.

For the second time this day time stops, and she sits there shaking, although she is not cold. The sounds of the storm, finally at its peak, beat against the old house. She has a father.

After Clemence begins breathing normally again, she stands back up, standing the chair up as well, and sits quietly back in it. She takes another big gulp of blackened coffee, closing her eyes tight as it slides down her gullet, inhales deeply and picks another letter at random.

This one dated June 3, 2010. A year after his confessional letter, and two months before her mother had passed. It reads:

Squirt—

It's been about twenty years I have been writing to you. I know you're reading them. You have to be reading them. Why aren't you writing back? I love you. I want to see you. Get to know you. I can't if you don't reply.

Who am I kidding…You probably never want to see me. Probably wish these letters will stop coming. If that's your wish, then see it granted. I am retiring my writing days. But I will leave you my address and number, if ever you want to write or talk. I hope, with all of my heart, that one day you do, but if not I wish you all the best in life.

Love, Dad

Clemence reads over the number and street name at the bottom of the page. Her mind goes blank, and she just sits there, mouth agape, breathing steady, frozen in place.

What does she do? Does she call this man, her fa-

ther? Would her mother want her to? She went through all the trouble to keep this from her, but then again, why keep the letters if this, her father, was supposed to stay secret? Maybe part of her mother never really let go of the love she held for him, but she never wanted her daughter to experience the pain she had endured. Her mother gave Clemence a wonderful life, the best she could have ever asked for. Working three jobs, and set up a college fund so that it was easy for her daughter, despite how hard it must have been for her. She really was supermom.

Clemence sheds a tear, while remembering her mother at her best, when she would sit out on the back deck, on the swinging bench, the wind blowing her hair in wild directions, while she did her Sunday crossword puzzle in the newspaper. Silently she says, I love you, mom.

Clemence then walks out of the kitchen, down the hall, and steps into the living room with the letter she just read in hand. She picks up the phone off the charger and dials the numbers with shaking hands, and hesitating a moment before pressing the 'Talk' button. She kneels on the couch cushions, her stomach against the back, staring into the hallway she came in through.

The phone rings.

She bites down on her lips, and fiddles with the dragonfly necklace her mother gave her one Christmas.

It rings for a second time.

Her heart beats as if a stampede were inside her chest as she realizes how silly this is.

Third ring.

He probably doesn't recognize the number.

Fourth.

Maybe he doesn't live at this address anymore. Fifth ring.

Don't pick up.

The phone clicks and a burly voice grumbles a hello.

Clemence stays silent on the other end.

The voice echoes his hello again.

She wants to speak but all her courage betrayed her at that moment, as she stands there choking on her words.

The voice says hello for the third time, growing impatient.

She answers weakly, " Hi…uh, Dad?"

There is a long pause on the receiving end of the phone.

"Squirt?"

§

Loving Al

Matthew Nickolau

For half a decade I have been afraid to realize I am gay. It isn't that I am lying to myself, because I am definitely straight, and I wouldn't say there is anything wrong with being gay. What I fear is this apparent stigma that says being gay is somehow wrong and something you should be ashamed of. Even being related to someone that is gay seems to be a horrible thing, and that is where my fear comes from.

In middle school my parents got a divorce after my father realized he was gay. I actually took it well, and am proud that I understood homosexuality at the age of eleven, instead feeling hatred toward my own father and a percentage of people. With little forethought, I told my classmates about my parents' divorce and my dad being gay. Quickly my classmates would make jokes about my dad coming out of the closet and me being "a chip off the old block". The first year of it was terrible, but my life became better and worse as many classmates would come out of the closet to me. Rarely, they would actually be confessing feelings for me, but they would trust me to understand.

Over time I formed a group of friends that were entirely gay, except for me. I tend to think of them as The Gays, as if they were a band, and I was their perspective on the straight male. Even so, the school sees me as gay, because The Gays aren't all stereotypical gays. While most of them are flamboyant like gay guys on television, some are normal or nerdy or buff, just like straight guys. I consider myself an average guy, but the school still believes I am gay. I know I'm straight. I am definitely straight. At least, I think I'm straight. I only began to question it when I met someone. That person's name is Al.

I was running late to gym class, or walking really, because I am always late to class. One of The Gays, most often James, will stop me in the hall to gossip and I'll be too nice to tell them I need to get to class. Most teachers have learned to just accept this as fact and don't take attendance till I show up anyway. Even though it had only been about a month since my junior year of high school started, the understanding was already clear. So I walked into the gymnasium and straight to the locker room, as everyone else prepared for today's activity.

Upon entering the locker room I was quickly greeted by the typical wave of men's body spray and deodorant. Someone was definitely overcompensating for a shower they didn't take that day. As I walked toward my locker, I saw there was a guy still changing. They were facing their locker, having changed shorts, and about to put their shirt on. I noticed they had some kind of strange undershirt that only covered the upper half of their torso. It looked very tight on him, though it was hard to notice with how tiny his figure was. I didn't pay much mind to this as he put his shirt on I approached my locker, a few lockers away from his.

The boy froze and stared at me. I glanced over at him but then continued as I was, opening my locker and beginning to change. Before I could even get my shirt off, the boy's stare got to me.

"Do you mind?" I asked. "I'm trying to change here."

"Oh! Sorry!" He said, blushing and looking away. "I was just afraid you'd ask questions."

I looked at him and said, "You mean your undershirt?"

The boy laughed and closed his locker. He walked

out, leaving me standing there feeling like an idiot. I wouldn't remain confused for long, as he made sure to make me notice him. Primarily because following that interaction, he would stare at me in every class we had together.

During math class I could feel his big brown eyes piercing the back of my head. Any efforts to meet his gaze resulted in him looking away. Sometimes it would be looking the other way, other times he would cover his eyes with his shaggy, light brown hair. At lunch The Gays would notice his attention and I told them to ignore him. We even walked a similar path home from school, or at least I hoped he was heading home. Gym class was probably the worst because he had this look that said, "Please pair me with the guy I'm staring at." Luckily this was just asking to be paired with someone completely unlike him.

With the help of The Gays, I found out a few important facts about this guy. First off his name was Al. Was it short for Albert or Alex or Alejandro? No one knew. The school's system listed his first name as just Al. He'd transferred from out of state and seems to maintain a decent GPA, or at least one to be more proud of than my own. Most of The Gays commented on how feminine Al looked, joking that he'd be my type. Their jokes aside, I wanted to get down to figuring this situation out and after a week of Al staring at me, I chose to approach him about it.

At the end of the day, right as our world history class let out, I intentionally dillydallied because I knew Al would wait until I left the classroom before leaving. Once the room was clear and the halls were mostly clear, I began walking out of the classroom. It was a bright afternoon and the hallway did not hide that fact. As I walked down the hall, turning a corner, I stopped once I knew I was out of Al's sight and waited. Once Al turned the corner I grabbed the collar of his baggy hooded sweatshirt and turned him around, to push him against the wall.

"Why do you keep staring at me?" I shouted, staring deep into his eyes.

Al looked down and yelled back, "I think I like you!"

I sighed and loosened my grip on his collar. "I can't reciprocate, Al. I'm not gay."

"I know you're not gay! I'm not a boy!"

"So you're trans?" I asked. I meant trans as in short for transgendered, which was a different can of worms entirely.

Al sighed and said, "No. I'm not a boy or a girl."

Al proceeded to tell me that he was biologically female, but considered himself agendered or genderless. He took on male pronouns because he felt the English language uses male as the default, and it created a sort of middle ground. Al continued to explain this as we walked home, saying that this school was the first school where he was able to pull off being seen as a guy, and was glad that I didn't question him when he was changing his clothes. He may have enjoyed that too much, but he said he had his eye on me before then. I didn't care to ask why because questioning a girl's affections for me was ridiculous. Having been the best friend of so many gay boys has made it hard to meet girls.

That was the thing, though. I had not met a girl interested in me, but not a boy either. Al considered himself to have no gender, and yet he effectively had both genders. Society would now see him as a boy, but his body was that of a girl. His baggy clothing sure did serve well to cover that up. Even in late summer he was wearing a sweatshirt comfortably. I didn't see any marks

from sweat on the way home. Al took a left on Comer Street, while I continued down Ruth Avenue, and he asked if I'd think about walking home with him more often. I told him I would consider it.

My mind was a wreck with thoughts of Al that following night. As I did my homework, I thought about the implications seeing Al could have. People would definitely think I'm gay, since Al was a boy to everyone else, and The Gays would definitely want to get to know him. What would I be, though? Would I be seeing Al as a guy or a girl? Could I be with someone who claims no gender and still be considered straight? Is there even a term for feeling romantically attracted to someone who doesn't have a gender?

I might have been getting ahead of myself. I wasn't even dating Al and I was already worried about what other people would think and what I would feel. I merely reminded myself that Al was not a boy or a girl, even if he was seen as a boy to some and a girl to likely very few. If I chose to, I probably could think of Al as a girl that doesn't dress like a girl. Maybe that is what I had to do. If I found a middle ground I could likely progress well enough with this.

The following week was spent bringing Al into my school life. We'd actually collaborate on group work in math class, he joined me and The Gays at lunch, and in gym class I'd be the one trying to be paired with him. The more I saw Al in action the more I started to like him. He was kinda funny, making really lame puns, and got along with The Gays pretty well. Seeing Al talk to them reminded me that The Gays were still guys. Some of them may have been rather effeminate and talked about guys how I think about girls, but they're just as much guys as I am a guy. I'm not sure why I didn't understand that sooner, actually. It surprised me quite a bit.

I did notice one of The Gays, James, looking extra uncomfortable around Al and he brought it to my attention whether I wanted it or not. He was the reason I was late most often, and the others insist that he liked me but knew I was straight.

"I don't like Al. She's making me uncomfortable." He said, looking down.

I corrected him, saying, "You mean he makes you uncomfortable."

James frowned and said, "She gives me dirty looks. I think she's making fun of me."

"That's insane, James. He just met you."

"Why do you keep calling Al a he? Al is obviously a girl."

I chose not to argue with James because there were people, James included, who felt there was no such thing as being transgendered. James might suggest that that Al feels inferior to men so he wanted to disguise himself as one, or admired homosexual males and wanted to be one too. My philosophy was simple enough: I don't care. I don't care if Al thought his gender was otter, or anyone for that matter. As long as they felt like I was treating them how they should be treated, I was content.

I made it clear to James I was done with the conversation, but he wanted to keep me there.

"Please tell me you don't like her like that." James said.

"Maybe I do," was my response. I proceeded to leave.

Friday, when classes ended, Al and I walked to his house to hang out. I definitely was feeling confident that I was attracted to Al, so I wanted to give him a chance. We shared a couch in his basement, where he put on some movie starring Nicolas Cage and he was sent

to prison for some reason I really did not care about. Cage was an actor I failed to find compelling, though Al seemed to love the guy. He would actually get very excited about things happening in the movie, even though it looked like he had seen it countless times before.

I think the prisoners took control of the plane around the time that Al scooted closer to me. Perhaps "scooted closer" is a poor way to describe it. He literally lunged at me, making me fall onto my back. As I layed there with Al on top of me, I stared at him, a bit afraid. I looked into Al's face and saw what I tended to continue seeing, which was a boy. It kinda made me become less comfortable.

"Uh…Al I'm flattered…but I'm not sure if I'm ready for this." I said, looking to my side to get a face full of John Malkovich in his prime.

Al frowned and asked, "Is it because you see a boy?"

I didn't want to nod but I did. It was the truth. It was hard to handle looking at a guy, especially if Al intended to start making out. Hopefully only make out.

He smiled at me and leaned over to reach under the table in front of the couch. Al came back up with a brush in hand and a hairclip in mouth. He brushed his shaggy hair to look more neat and clean, and then stuck the hairclip in it. He also adjusted his binder, revealing his rather small breasts more clearly. In all honesty, I didn't know what to expect, but when Al tried to look like a girl, he really did look like a girl.

I'm not entirely sure what we said after Al's transformation, but I do know that I pulled Al close and we pressed our lips against each other's and held on tightly. The warmth of his body against mine was so nice I didn't want to stop. My eyes were closed and I stopped caring whether Al was a boy or a girl or an otter. What mattered was this beautiful feeling of intimacy that I had never expected to feel. It was interrupted when Al took his face off of mine and said Nicolas Cage's line with him.

"Put the bunny back in the box." They said, followed by Al laughing and scooting back to rest his head on my chest. She continued to quote him and enjoy the movie, and I attempted to watch the film, unsure whether Al's enjoyment of the film was genuine or ironic. The rest of the night was followed by continuing to watch movies starring Cage until I felt I should walk home. Al gave me a peck on the cheek before I left, and I just smiled back.

I was definitely in falling love at this point. Realistically, of course I was going to fall in love. I spent five years where no girls would be interested in me. I had to take what I could get. Nothing would have knocked me off this high if I didn't have the thrill of someone I wasn't interested in crushing on me. As soon as I got home, I made a post online about having a nice night with Al, and instantly started getting texts on my phone. They were pretty much all from the guys.

Jeff: way to go champ

Frankie: were you gentle? ;)

Zak: R u 2 official yet?

The only message I wasn't happy to see was from James.

James: pls tell me you didn't

I had no plans on responding to any of their messages, but I had to make something clear with James. I didn't want this to get out of hand.

Me: thats not your concern

James: it is now

Me: stop it. please

James: no! she's a harpie!

Me: he isnt. stop now.

James: ill show u and the rest what shes really like!

Me: what do you mean?

Me: James?

James stopped responding after that. I didn't know what to expect out of him, but I should have been more prepared than I was. Instead I was too happy to care. I felt like Al was my beautiful, strange flower. In fact a flower is a great way to see Al. Flowers are genderless, though they don't really have a choice or conscious thought. Whatever the case, I was confident I was in love with Al, and whether he was a boy or a girl or both or neither, it would continue to be that way.

Problems came up that following Monday when James didn't make an appearance at school. Correction: He was hiding from me. The other guys saw him, but said he definitely was trying not to be seen. We all knew it was because he was afraid to accept that Al and I were pretty much dating. Al and I actually agreed on not participating in public displays of affection at school, primarily because we knew the grief we'd get for it. Neither of us wanted additional attention, which is why it was a shame that James wasn't taking this so well. He likely wouldn't see anything that would bother him.

After gym, Al found a note in his locker telling him to meet someone in classroom negative 103 right away, and to skip class. This referred to the basement level classes that were rarely used for school activities and practically unmonitored. I always found it funny that they were given negative numbers, as if you didn't feel like a loser enough having a club meeting down there. There was no way I was letting Al do that alone, so we both changed and went to the classroom.

The stairs leading down were poorly lit and the air coming from the basement was always so eerily cold that it was impressive people didn't hang out down there more often during the summer heat. We walked down the hall, which smelled like wet dust or mildew, till we reached the classroom. Upon entering the door shut itself and the situation became more and more clear.

In this dim room, with pipes exposed in the ceiling and multiple tiles missing from the floors, and desks that would fall apart just from looking at them, we were standing in the middle of a trap. The person who closed the door was a girl I had seen James talk to multiple times, but her name escaped me. Standing not too far from the door, where the teacher might stand, were James and another girl I failed to recognize. There was an incredible frown on James's face, as he walked around the desk he was standing behind and closer to me and Al.

"I didn't want you to get hurt. She was supposed to come alone," James said, looking very upset.

I smirked and said, "With you like this? There was no way I'd let him go alone."

"Then this makes it worse that I can't apologize for what I am about to do."

James grabbed behind him to pick up a paintball gun that had been sitting on the desk. He pointed it at Al's face and said, "I'm giving you two options, Alice. Only these two options."

Al began to tear up and backed up into me, either out of fear or for comfort. He nodded, terrified.

"The first option is that you strip naked and walk around the school till I say so. You show everyone you're a girl and stop pretending to be a boy." James then pointed the gun to the floor in front of Al's feet, and said, "Or I shoot you with this paintball gun till I feel like stopping." He then looked at me and said, "Him

too. Both of you will get coated in paint and welts."

Al burst into tears and hid his face in my chest. I stared at James, disgusted.

"Why are you doing this? There's no reason!"

James laughed a bit and said, "I want to teach her that she can't just pretend to be a boy."

"Really James? Is that really your motivation here?" I knew it was his heartbreak.

James blushed a bit then shouted, "Quiet! Alice here needs to make a choice."

I looked down at Al and rubbed his back, and when he stopped crying he looked up at me. I held him close but he pushed me off and kept his hands at his side.

"P-Please undress me…" Al said, slowly starting to look down.

I gave him a caring smile and said, "Al we don't need to listen to him."

"I can't do it myself…please just undress me…"

I honestly could not believe Al. He would rather reveal himself to the school than ruin a sweatshirt and a pair of jeans? No. That wasn't it. He didn't want me to get hurt. Knowing he caused me to get hurt would probably eat at him, but this was no longer his choice then.

I pulled Al's hood up and held him close and tight as I could. I put my face down and said, "You're going to have to start shooting because Al's not streaking."

Really I didn't catch James's reaction, because I was too focused on Al. As soon as we started getting pelted with paint Al started to fall, as if he was unable to stand, and I let us both go down to the floor. I kept his face close to my chest and could hear him sobbing. When I thought James had stopped, I looked up to get some additional paint to the back and then hear the gun click empty. James growled angrily, leaving with the girls, and I sat myself up, Al still in my arms.

My body should have ached, but I felt fine. Al took his face off of my chest, revealing very red eyes and wet cheeks. I asked if he was okay and he quietly said he was. We stood up, covered in very many colors of paint, and I joked that we looked like clowns. Al laughed and we carefully found our way to the nurse's office. She said she didn't have spare clothes, so I asked if she could send us home early. She found that appropriate enough and Al and I walked home.

On the way home we passed the park we often overlooked and saw the sprinklers running. I looked at Al to see if he had the same idea as me, and he definitely did. We walked into the sprinklers and the paint came off, for the most part, leaving a few marks and welts to remind us of what happened. It was unlikely that we would forget, especially since it was the first time I was bullied by a friend since middle school.

Al asked me why I chose the paint and I gave him the best response I could come up with. I pulled him close and gave him a kiss on the lips. Unlike before, he looked like a boy, but what mattered was that he was Al.

§

Transitioning

Michael Perez

Barely a week had passed since she died. My bags were already packed and ready to go. I had no one else left. My father disappeared before I was two and my grandparents on her side were gone. All the arrangements were made. I was going to be staying with my mother's long time friend, Rose. They went to high school together, studied at IU, and after college remained close through phone calls and e-mails mostly, with an occasional visit here and there. They were close, but I had only met Mrs. Connor a couple of times. She lived in Indianapolis and we were in Chicago. I last saw her at my mother's funeral. Naturally, we didn't talk much. I wasn't quite sure what to expect, but my mother assured me they would welcome me with open arms when the time came. The time came.

My alarm clock had been going off for 15 minutes before I even moved. "Shit, she's going to be here in five hours," I said out loud trying to convince myself to get out of bed. I walked down the same hallway I walked every morning, into the same bathroom I walked into every morning. I caught a glimpse of myself as I passed the mirror. I looked like hell. I felt like hell. This entire process was exhausting. I half expected to walk out of the bathroom and hear the morning news on the TV. She always watched the news even though she would complain that it was never good. When I opened the door to leave the bathroom, there was no TV, there was only silence. It was only me.

I took six steps back towards my room before I found myself hitting my back against a wall and slouching over. My head fell into my arms on my knees. My mother had a tumor that was inoperable. She tried chemo for six months before calling it quits. It wasn't helping and she was tired of throwing up and feeling weak. I guess knowing she was going to die was supposed to make the transition a little easier. It didn't. Not now, not here in this hallway alone. I just sat there. I closed my eyes and tried remembering everything I could about those last few days. Everything was seemingly okay.

"Ryan," my mom was screaming for me from the living room.

I sprinted down the hallway and ran down the stairs as fast as I could. "What's wrong? What's wrong?" I said as I turned the corner expecting the worst. She was sitting in her rocking chair with Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows. She started reading them all when she was diagnosed. I think it kept her mind off the situation. She didn't have much time for progress though because she was in and out of the hospital. She was finally nearing the end of the series.

"I can't believe Harry is dead," she said as she put the book on her lap.

"Are you kidding me?" I said trying to hold back from yelling. "You were screaming bloody murder and that's the problem? I thought something was wrong." I looked at her like she was crazy and she just smiled.

"Sweetie," she said, "I told you I've been feeling better lately."

I couldn't be mad at my own mother so I just shook my head and sighed. "Just don't scare me like that," I said. "Keep reading. And no more yelling," I said in a mocking parent tone as I walked out of the room.

I finally picked myself up. I had some last minute things I had to get done before I walked out the door and never looked back. This house was going to be sold, another 'plan' left by my mother. Everything in the house

that I didn't take was going with it. After all, I couldn't afford the bills and taxes. I guess this was supposed to be the best option. I went over last minute checklists and even managed to eat a bowl of cereal. In the kitchen I began to see her again. My eye-lids felt heavy, so I closed them for a minute.

"Mom I told you," I said as I closed the refrigerator door, "I'm not worried about finishing school with your condition. That's that." I put the gallon of milk on the table and poured a glass for myself and her. She just shook her head.

"You have to do what's best for you Ryan. For God's sake you're wasting your intelligence." I was away at school for a semester. When I found out about her condition, I dropped out to look after her.

Her voice was rising and I was sure this was going nowhere good. "Look," I said trying to calm her down, "I don't think I'm the most important thing here, okay? If you die..."

"When I die," she interrupted.

I slammed my hand onto the table making her jump. "Can you at least pretend you're not okay with this?" I was shouting. "When you die? When you die I'm going to be shipped off to some stranger's house! I have no idea what to expect and you want to talk to me about college?" It was practically involuntary. I didn't realize what I was doing until I saw how shocked she looked. I brought my fist to my mouth and bit my finger nail to try and relax.

"Ryan," she hesitated, "I thought, I didn't know that's how you felt."

"You never really asked." I wasn't shouting anymore. I just stared at my food blankly.

"Rose is amazing," she said reaching over for my hand. "She and her husband are great people and will provide for you more than anyone I know."

I moved my hand away from hers and cleared my throat. I tried to get this conversation done as quickly as possible. "Can we just eat now?"

When my eyes opened I was still sitting in the same kitchen chair. The one I yelled at her in. I wanted time to myself, but I didn't have any. I had to get things ready for Rose. I finished my cereal and went back upstairs passing her room and the closed door that led to it. I didn't want to see her empty room. I guess I felt like that would be too final.

At about one PM I heard a car pulling into the driveway. When I looked out the window I saw a silver Mercedes SUV carrying Mrs. Connor and her two daughters. Mr. Connor stayed home to get things ready. I greeted them at the door before they could knock.

"Ryan," Mrs. Connor said with an empathetic smile. She's two years younger than my mom, making her 44, but she still looked young and beautiful. She still had her natural blonde hair and her blue eyes matched her dress. She had a long black overcoat on that went just past her knees.

I forced a small smile "Hi, Mrs. Connor," I said. She caught me off guard as she went in for a hug but I went with it. It was welcoming. The kind of hug that says I'm sorry and I love you all at once. Coming from someone who hardly knew me, the hug made me relax just a little bit. I looked down and saw a little girl holding a stuffed shark. I knelt down to be on her eye level.

"You must be Emily," I said. She was a small girl wearing a pink jacket with a little jumper and black shoes; very church-like. She had blonde hair that was done in pig tails and green eyes.

She nodded, and then she hugged me too. "I'm sorry about your mommy," she said with a soft voice.

"Me too, little one," I said. I couldn't help but smile; a genuine smile. I don't remember the last time I wore one of those. "How old are you?" I asked her as I pulled away from her hug.

"Six," she said as she looked down at her shark shyly.

"And who's that," I asked pointing at the shark in her hands.

"Bruce," she said.

"Bruce huh," I said, "That's a good name." I laughed and looked at Rose's other daughter. She was wearing jeans and a Loyola University Chicago sweater. Her hair was black, which offset her green eyes. My mom told me she was 16 but she was already getting offers from colleges in the area. She was looking at her cell phone when I spoke up. "Samantha?" I asked and looked toward her.

"Sam. Hi. It's nice to meet you," she said as she put her phone in her pocket and held out her hand.

"You as well," I said, shaking her hand. "Well I don't want to keep you guys waiting so I guess I'll go get my things," I smiled and shrugged as I turned around to head to my room.

I heard Mrs. Connor say, "Sam, can you help Ryan with his stuff?" and then Sam came walking behind me. She didn't seem shy or even upset with the fact that some stranger was going to be moving into her house, and this took me by surprise.

"What can I help with?" she asked with an eager tone.

"Oh, I have a few small boxes of random junk," I pointed toward boxes with music, movies, and pictures in it. "If you could just grab either one I would really appreciate it."

"Of course," she answered immediately, "and Ryan," she said as I was about to walk out of the room with my bigger bags, "I truly am sorry. Your mom visited a few times and I really liked her."

"Yeah," I said, nodding. I was trying to be strong, "Thank you."

We loaded up Mrs. Connor's SUV with all of the boxes and bags. She had cleaned it out for my use which was great because everything I was taking was creating space problems for the four of us. Emily was being squished between two bags but she kept insisting that it didn't bother her. Before we left I double walked the house to make sure I didn't forget anything. Then I came to her door. I hadn't walked into her bedroom since she had died, and here I was; just one last time.

"9-1-1 Emergency," an operator's calm voice answered, ready to listen and help.

"I need an ambulance," my voice was fighting with shakes and cracks. I had to keep it together now. "I need an ambulance. My mom is unconscious and not breathing. I don't know what to do." My hands shook and I tried to give the operator my address. I was practically screaming at her.

"What happened?" she asked with that same calm voice. When I couldn't respond she spoke again, "I need you to just relax and tell me what happened."

"I don't know!" I was panicking and panting hard, "I was just watching a movie and I heard a loud crash." I went over details in my head. Just to try and take my mind away from what was happening. "She was just lying on her bedroom floor. She's really sick and I just need someone here now. Please!"

"The paramedics are on their way. I'm going to stay on the line with you until they arrive okay?"

I tried to match her tone. Impossible. Operators always have a soft voice and calm tone like it's a requirement or something. I wasn't going to be able to relax. I

was scared to death and that was reflected in my voice. I kept trying to get my mother to respond. I was talking at her when the paramedics arrived. I hung up the phone and watched them wheel my mom into an ambulance performing CPR as they got her out of the house. I arrived at the hospital and ran to her room. They managed to get her breathing again, but only with the help of a machine. She regained consciousness for a very small window.

"Hey," I said, jumping up to the side of her bed.

She moved the breathing mask away and fought to bring words to the surface. "Ryan,"

"You don't have to talk, mom," I tried to stop her but she kept moving on like she always did.

"Ryan," tears welled up in her eyes and I bit my lip. "I want you to have a great life. You deserve it." Her breathing slowed.

"I know, I know. Just get some rest okay?" My words weren't very clear. I just kept insisting that she relax and get some sleep.

"Hey little one," she said as she grabbed my hand. She hadn't called me that in 14 years. "I love you," she said.

"I love you too," I said. She smiled.

Ten minutes later I was screaming for help. They fought so hard to bring her back to me, but after the longest nine minutes of my life, they stopped trying. A doctor grabbed me by the shoulders and held me. All he could say was "I'm sorry," in the same tone the operator had used. Just like that, she was gone.

My eyes were filled with tears now. I hadn't cried since the night after the hospital. I was standing in the last place I saw her home. Maybe leaving this place behind is what I needed to do. Maybe the memories here were just too much. I picked my head up and wiped my eyes. Snot filled my nose and I wiped it away with my sleeve. "I'm sorry," I said.

When I finally built up the courage to walk downstairs I came into the living room where everyone was waiting. Apparently, Emily had to use the bathroom so they came in and decided to just give me some time to say goodbye. Not to my mother, I believed, but to my memories. They noticed I had been crying but they didn't say anything. I appreciated that. As I walked toward the door, Emily grabbed my hand and started to lead me out. She smiled at me and said, "It's going to be okay, Ryan," and right then, at that moment, I believed her.

§

The Re-emergence of Sarah Hamilton

Jennifer Kieras

BEEP! BEEP! BEEP! This is the dreadful noise that I hear every morning to wake up at a decent hour so I can take care of my little sister. I am so tired, and getting out of bed is the last thing that I want to do right now. If I don't get out of bed now, though, my sister won't eat. I roll out of bed finally and head downstairs to make my sister lunch. While making my way to the kitchen I trip over Vodka bottles, wine bottles, and many other types of alcohol that are on the living room floor. My mom is passed out on the couch once again with the television blaring. I should get used to seeing this, but every morning it drives me crazy when I have to turn the television down just to talk to my sister and I have to pick up all of the alcohol bottles to walk in and out of the kitchen. This is all part of my life on a daily basis. The sad part is, this is just the beginning.

A couple hours pass and it is time for me to get ready for work. Unlike most people, I can't just throw on a pair of nice black pants and a polo; it takes me hours to get ready for work. I first start off with my make-up. I wear lots and lots of make-up, and when I am done I look like a fake Barbie doll, but hey, it gets the job done. I wear a lot of foundation so I look super tan. I also like to put on blue eye shadow, fake eyelashes, and lots of black eyeliner. I normally end with a little bit of red blush and some bright red lipstick. After I am done doing my make-up, I start doing my hair. I usually go with super straight hair, and I add a lot of volume to it because as my boss says "the bigger the better." As far as my clothes go, I wear matching lingerie underneath whatever theme is presented at my work that night. Tonight is "formal wear" so I get to wear a nice blue sparkly short dress with silver high heels. Of course, just like every other night, I also have to wear my signature black leggings that look just like spider webs.

Work isn't very far down the road from my house. I could practically walk there if I wanted too, but I prefer to drive because otherwise I just continuously get whistled at and it creeps me out. I work at a place called Blue Moon. Blue Moon is a brown brick building that is on the corner of Wicker and Jefferson Street. A guy named Rick who is thirty-four years old, tall, skinny, and very well dressed all the time owns Blue Moon. On the outside, it looks kind of "sketchy" because our sign lights are half out and the other half normally flicker on and off, there aren't any windows, and the doors are dark and really heavy duty. When you drive past, all you can hear is music blaring and a bunch of men rolling out completely drunk. I get to park my car in the back parking lot, which has no streetlights nearby so it's impossible to see. Once I go through the back door, that is where all the fun begins.

Every day I hear and see the same things around me. I see the same old men who are known as our "daily customers." I can smell the sweat of all my coworkers, friends, and even the sweat of the customers. I smell beer, lots of beer, all the time. The smell is actually starting to get to me and makes me sick. On top of all of this, I feel like I can't even see or think straight. I am always in a dark room with music and flashing lights. They give me headaches every night when I get back home, but I just have to keep reminding myself that the money is worth it. I really need to be there for my little sister. No one in my house is doing well at all, especially my mother ever since she does nothing but drink, smoke

drugs, and watch television. She created a lot of debt with her drug and alcohol abuse, and doing this job is the only way that I know how to make money and put meals on the table for my sister and me.

"Hey, baby girl with those super sexy web leggings! What are you doing all over there by yourself? Why don't you come show me a little something, you Spider?" Ever since a customer yelled that to me one day, Spider became my new nickname and my boss made it a requirement for me to wear my web leggings because he felt it added more "character" to my nickname. This is what my life consists of now, so I better get used to it.

This all started back when I was sixteen years old. My father decided to walk out on my mother, sister, and me. He left us for some hot rich blonde. I think the only reason he went with her was because she was young and had a lot of money, not that he actually loved her. My sister and I were obviously very upset with him leaving, but my mom definitely took it the worst. She would stay up all night crying her eyes out and would have at least one bottle of alcohol a night. She became worse and worse as time went on and she started drinking multiple bottles a day and adding drugs to her daily substance intake. She was a complete mess and spent all of our money on drugs and alcohol, never was it on food for us kids.

One day my little sister was trying to talk to my mom and said to her, "Mom, I got an A on my math test today! Aren't you proud of me?"

My mom was just staring off into space and didn't even acknowledge the fact that my little sister was standing directly in front of her. I have tried getting my mom to stop over and over again and tried to tell her there was more to life than my dad, but nothing seemed to work. Other than not getting meals a lot of the time, I also had to turn down a lot of colleges, because obviously college funds were completely out of the question. I was really depressed about this, but I also realized it was a good thing because then I could stay home and make sure that my sister was being taken good care of.

I went to the refrigerator one day and noticed that there was absolutely nothing to eat in there. At this point, I knew something had to change. My best friend, Bridgitte, whom I have been friends with for as long as I can remember, told me she knew exactly how to help me. She told me that she was keeping a secret from me for a while, but she felt it was time for me to be filled in. This was the day that Bridgitte took me to Blue Moon for the first time. I honestly thought she was just taking me out for a night of fun, which I was really mad about, but I quickly learned that was not the case. I walked in and there was music blaring and a lot of girls dancing on poles with clothes flying everywhere. I had dollar bills thrown at me just for walking in. Bridgitte explained my situation to Rick, and I patiently waited to see what he had to say.

"Well, show me what you got!"

I have never in my life been a dancer, nor have I ever tried to dance while taking my clothes off at the same time. At first I panicked and just wanted to run out of there, but I knew that in the end the money would be worth it.

"You have a lot of work to do, girl, but you definitely have a lot of potential in you."

I ended up getting the job that day. My first night, I'll never forget. It was on a Friday night and, of course, it was extremely busy. This night went really well for me and I seriously couldn't believe how much money I had made after only a couple of hours. After about a week of work, I was able to have the refrigerator and the freezer

completely stocked for my sister and me. I tried to give my mom food on a daily basis, but she was too fried or drunk to even think of eating anything.

Months passed and I still couldn't believe the income I was bringing in. I was a teenage girl and I felt rich. I wasn't exactly proud of myself nor did I like being known as a stripper, but this was the only choice that I had. I became very well known at the club very quickly, and a lot of guys actually started requesting me to their tables.

"Hey, Spider! What are you going to show me tonight?"

"Hey, Spider! When you are done with him you should come over here."

After a while, I started to get really sick of the creeps and the rude comments. I just wanted to be a normal teenage girl again. Don't get me wrong. I was very happy with the money I was making, but I just wanted a life. I really wanted to be able to go to college, get an education, and start having a normal career. I didn't want to be stuck shaking my ass and showing my body off to a bunch of guys my whole life.

One night I went home and calculated all the money that I had received being a stripper. After many hours, I felt that I had earned enough to start attending a community college near my house. When I finished, my grandmother, who I haven't seen in ages because my mother completely shut her out for so long, came knocking on the door. I guess my little sister had called crying because she was lonely and worried about my mom.

"Hey! You need to get off that couch of yours and start taking care of your children. I love you to death and I hate seeing you do this to yourself." My grandma pulled the blanket off my mother.

My mom said nothing in return.

"Look, I know you are sad that your husband left you. I have been really upset ever since your dad left me, too. But I realize there is so much more to life than a man. You have two beautiful children who love you to death. You need to think about getting some help so you can be there for them!"

My mom finally started to talk to my grandma. This was the first time anyone had been able to get her to talk in quite some time. My mother, after many hours of talking, finally agreed that she would go to rehab. We hoped this was a start and we might be able to get our mother back again. I filled my grandmother in on my plans to go to college and she was extremely proud of me.

"Where did you get all of this money from, Sarah?"

"Well.....uhh..."

"You know you can tell me anything, Sarah," my grandma told me.

"Well, for many months I have been a stripper at the club on Jefferson Street called Blue Moon. My friend Bridgitte hooked me up with a job there. I am sorry, grandma; I just really needed the money! I needed to help my little sister!"

Surprisingly my grandma completely understood why I did what I did, and even though she wasn't proud her granddaughter was a stripper, she was proud that I took matters into my own hands and tried to help the family.

After a few weeks passed, my mom was finally in rehab. She wasn't doing great and we actually thought she wasn't going to continue, but she is still sticking in there. I was accepted into the community college right by my house, and my first day of classes was going to start on Monday. I was so excited, yet so nervous at the same

time, because I felt it had been forever since I was last in school. On Monday, I went to my first class, which was English. I sat right in the front row. The teacher asked us to introduce ourselves to the class so we could get to know everyone's name. I raised my hand to go first, because I was super excited to be back in school again.

"Hello, my name is Spi… Sarah Hamilton."

It was going to take me some time to get used to, but it was definitely great being able to introduce myself by my real name again.

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PHOTO: TIFFANY REDAR

That Window on the Fifth Floor Remodel

Lisa Halstaed-King

A bead of sweat trailed down his olive forehead and Check wiped it away as he stepped back to observe his handiwork with the drywall trowel. He nearly caught his foot on a crumpled drop-cloth spattered with old paint and new globs of joint compound. Looking over the expanse of freshly hung drywall, miscellaneous boxes of supplies and tools scattered about the fifth floor remodel he and his business partner were undertaking, he was momentarily stunned by the work left to do but also thrilled at the challenge of the job.

In the far corner he saw Lily looking out that tiny rear window that she'd barely noticed before they signed the transfer of ownership papers. Lily, his business partner for the last seven years, was an extremely hard working, dishwater blonde who hailed all the way from the dairy capital of Wisconsin. He certainly did not think she was your typical San Franciscan; she held herself to a strict moral and ethical code. She proved herself over and over again and Check was convinced he had not made a mistake by taking her on as his partner. He'd had no romantic notion about her when she first approached him for the job even though she was an attractive woman: he was married at the time. She'd worked him like a dog after his divorce to help him get through the difficulties that accompany divorce from a selfish woman and having two small children involved. Slowly they transitioned back to normal hours and a normal life; whatever normal was.

Now, ever since she'd returned from a decorating convention in South San Francisco two months ago, she'd been mesmerized with that small piece of glass. He noticed that she never stood directly in front of it. Standing off to the side, she would peer out and get lost in the scene on the other side of the tall brick wall that separated this budding business district and that rundown section of disparate dwellings. It might have been a world away from how she stared and fell into a trance-like state. Something felt not like normal to him.

Check set down the trowel and located the thermos among their pile of personal belongings, shared lunch box, briefcases and wadded up jackets to ward off the morning chill. He found the mugs and blew out the drywall dust, unscrewed the mini cup and popped the tab to let the warm brew pour out. Check was used to drinking Lily's style of coffee. He gave a crocked reflective smile when he looked at today's offering. She called it Ashley coffee, after his ex-wife. She said it was because both are blonde and artificially sweet.

He stepped over a mound of wadded sheet plastic to bring Lily a cup. A look of fear momentarily crossed her face and her body jerked when he touched her arm causing the mug to spill a little down her arm and a lot onto Check's hand. She hurriedly took the mug from his burning hand as he shook off the extra and went to find a rag to wipe himself. Upon his return, she immediately apologized but he just waved it away. "Want to tell me what that was about?"

"I just didn't hear you, that's all." She avoided making eye contact with him. She tried to take a long drink of her coffee but only scalded the roof of her mouth causing her to hastily set the mug on the floor. She quickly returned to her roll of drywall tape and began taping up the seams of the walls so they could be mudded. Her hair was in a ponytail and bounced as she scuttled across the floor.

Again, that was not normal to him. They constantly talked and never avoided any subject that came up. Well, not never. For a while now he had been avoiding the subject of his parents. He had left China seventeen years ago at the righteously indignant age of eighteen. He stole money from his parent's cash register, hopped a plane and came to California. He hadn't spoken to them since. Lily had been suggesting that he call them to help aid him in his search for the sister they gave up for adoption because they wanted a son. He was angry at them. He was angry about so many children being discarded into orphanages and abandoned along side streets all for that sacred male when China's One Child policy was law of the land. Check hated that family dissection and was equally repulsed by abortion, regardless of the term.

He slowly swallowed down his own coffee, set the mug down by Lily's and returned to his trowel and bucket of compound. Two hours would go by in complete silence before he looked around the room again. The walls were nearly finished and Lily was back at that window. She turned and looked at him just as his lips narrowed into a tight straight line.

In an attempt to sound casual, she shrugged her shoulder and pointed to the back side of the remodel, "Since you're almost finished with that, I'm going to head to the kitchenette and seal the grout on that backsplash. It'll be nice to get that up and running, huh?" She walked directly back there with no further explanation.

Check mudded the remaining two seams and dug out two bottles of water from the cooler. He headed toward the back and found Lily replacing the lid to the grout sealer. He handed her a bottle. "It's just after 11:00, do you want to break for lunch?"

Lily simply nodded and took a sip of water. They both headed off to the future employee restroom to wash their labored hands. Check hip-checked her at the sink and she playfully hip-checked him back.

Check found the least soiled fabric drop cloth and two buckets. He turned the empty bucket upside down. The other was still full of mastic and the lid was smooth so he set it out for Lily. He arranged them by the massive window that would be part of the conference room at the front of the office space. It overlooked a beautifully manicured business district. There were tall palm trees, brightly colored hibiscus, marigolds and poppies in bloom. The sky was clear blue and the sun was warm. What few cars parked along the road and not in parking garages were all late model luxury cars. It was a completely opposite world from that which lay out that tiny back window.

Lily handed him a tuna salad on wheat and a plastic zipper bag of carrots and celery sticks. She used the white lid of the bright blue Igloo cooler to make a table for the Tupperware containers of ranch dressing and peanut butter. While they ate, they talked about their schedule for the next couple of days.

When Check finished his sandwich he rubbed his fingers together to rid them of bread crumbs. He downed the remainder of his water and rested his head on the side of the thick glass window. He looked at Lily and decided to take another approach at finding out what had been bothering her. "Do you still like it here in San Francisco?" His voice was a little more quiet than he intended.

But the tone worked. Lily looked at him somberly and replied, "If you're asking me if I miss my family, I do. I miss the cows and the farm fresh milk. If you're asking me if I've considered leaving, I have."

Check was not shocked by her response but admitted to himself that he was hurt by it nonetheless.

"But," she continued before he said anything, "the architecture of the Victorian row houses still fascinate me, the ding of the cable car bell still makes me smile." A smile appeared on her face. "I can see myself riding a scooter down Lombard Street and taking in the smell of the ocean. That isn't something you experience on a daily basis in Wisconsin, you know? And the fog, well, the fog intrigues me."

Check could see from the faraway look on her face that she was there racing her scooter down that crocked street with her hair flying behind her and the sun on her face or there, taking lunch on the knoll overlooking the magnificent skyline of the city or the splendor of the Golden Gate Bridge stretched out before her. He couldn't picture her milking cows or canning jelly.

"I can, you know?"

He'd been lost in thinking about her and didn't hear what she'd said. "Sorry, you can do what?"

"I can milk a cow."

He'd wondered how she knew what he was thinking.

"But most farms don't do that by hand anymore. The cows come into a milking station. Their udders are cleaned and they are hooked up to machines that simulate the tugging motion of a suckling calf and it milks the cows. The machines automatically stop when. . ."

"Then why do you always look out that back window when there is such a spectacular view of the city from this window?" he interrupted.

She just looked at him and said nothing.

"Nothing? You have nothing to say. You always have something to say!" he pushed. "You tell me about your neighbors, what you heard on the radio and read in the Chronicle. You tell me interesting facts about cows and cute things your niece says." Check's hands and arms were now a part of the conversation. They were waving and pointing like a pasta loving Italian instead of your typical timid-looking, soft-walking man from China. "But, I ask you a simple question about why you are always looking out that window at that God forsaken strip of gray existence littered with garbage, street violence and prostitutes and you have nothing to say?"

"What do you want me to say?"

"The truth is always a good place to start." His matter of factness must have sounded like an accusation because the color started to rise in her cheeks.

"What? that I've never seen anything like that before; that even though it sucks away at my humanity, I can't help being drawn to it. Is that what you want to hear?"

"I want to help you. I know something is bothering you. It's bothering me, too."

"Help me?" She shook her head in disbelief. "You want to help me when you won't take help yourself?"

"I don't know what you are talking about; I've taken help from you many times."

She gave a smug smile and her nostrils flared. "You are too proud. You think because I'm a little ole farm girl that I can't handle myself? You think because you left home at 18 and made a name for yourself here in the states that you are the conqueror of little girls' nightmares?"

With his voice elevating, "No, I said nothing like that. I think nothing like that." He rose from his makeshift seat to stare Lily in the face.

She rose to meet his challenge. "So now, what am I? Am I some horrible person because day after day I look out at those people and do nothing about their plight? Maybe I'm judgmental because I wonder how could someone do something so low as to shoot up day

after day and sell their bodies to skanks all so they could buy more drugs to shoot up again." Her lip was quivering and her shaking finger was pointing out that tiny window.

She ranted on. "You want horrible? Lemon, that little blonde child of yours, isn't even yours! Miss Southern Belle Ashley is horrible. She cheated on you and you're the one still paying. Hmm?" She moved her hands like the scales of justice, "A rye bread and a cracker girl." Lily was sounding like she was on the verge of hysterics.

Check shook his head back at her. "Don't go there." Then his face pinched in confusion, "Who are you?"

Lily trudged angrily to that tiny back window and forcefully pointed out at the dark scene that sunlight couldn't seem to touch. "Oh, I went there. And you want to know where else I'm going to go? Did you ever stop to think that that little Asian woman sitting on that stoop smoking her three packs of cigarettes a day could be your sister out there peddling prepubescent Ukrainian girls chained to bed frames with stained and diseased mattresses who will one day grow up, if they grow up, to be drugged out whores? Maybe God will spare them and they'll OD before their 18th birthday."

"That's enough!" Check raged. Never before had he and Lily exchanged such heated words. He charged at her and grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her. He shoved her up against the wall. There she stayed as he pointed his finger commanding her to stay. He took up his former tool and scooped a clump of mud from the bucket. Madly he pasted the window, slashing back and forth at that tiny glass demon that was tormenting them both.

He threw the instrument down at Lily's feet. "What?" he shouted. He questioned her by raising his arms and shrugging his shoulders in a lack of comprehension. "You're not making any sense. What is wrong? What happened to you?" he demanded. "You haven't been the same since you've gotten back from your convention. I just want to be there for you like you are always there for me. That's what partners do."

Lily's lower lip began to tremble and her eyes filled with tears but her head continued to slowly and rhythmically shake no. Her words came out broken and hushed. "Then just be there for me. Be strong for me."

"How can I be strong for you when I don't know what's wrong?"

Her eyes were pleading with him, "Be courageous for me. Show me what bravery looks like." Tears were now washing down her face. "Let me see that a person can survive after their pride has been demolished and a piece of who they are has been ripped away."

"Anything, I promise. I will do whatever it takes to help you." He took a step toward her.

Her quiet request was simple. "I want you to call your parents."

"What?" he asked, afraid he misunderstood her.

"Please."

"I, I don't know where to start."

Lilly went to her briefcase. She came back with a yellow piece of paper covered in notes. "Here's a list of shoe stores and shoe repair shops within a 50 mile radius of where you were born."

"I don't know how this will help," he questioned.

"Please," she squeaked out.

Check gingerly took the paper and looked it over. He went to his briefcase and pulled out a pencil and his cell phone. Two missed calls he would have to call back later. He marked the most logical places first and steadied his phone in the other hand. Lily just stood there, leaning against the wall unsure of what was going to happen. "You know, it's 1:30 in the morning over there?" he looked over at her hoping she would change her mind.

When a flash of disappointment clouded her face, he dialed the first number. He listened to the recording on the other side of the world. "I don't think that was the right place." He dialed the next number, shook his head no and scratched it off the list. Another call and his eyes widened. "That was definitely not it." He continued down the list of places he marked until finally on the seventh call someone answered.

Check rapidly began speaking in Mandarin. He turned his back to Lily. He knew she couldn't understand a word he was saying but he didn't want to see her face and have her trying to figure out what his expressions meant. He wanted privacy. He continued talking and walked back toward the kitchenette. Lily waited. She slid down the wall and hugged her knees and waited.

When he returned, his eyes were red from crying. He wiped his face with his shoulder and reached into his briefcase to pull out his computer. He looked over at Lily sitting up against the wall and saw the anxious look on her face. "He was taking inventory," he said calmly.

"Was he able to help you, anyway? You were gone a long time."

"It was my father."

Excitement transformed Lily's face. She scooted over and joined Check on the floor with his computer. He typed in the website that he'd been using to help locate his sister but without a birthdate, it didn't offer much help. He now entered a birthday provided by his father and within seconds it returned 31 possibilities. He looked over the information, eliminating ones that didn't fit the profile. Thirteen were left, a woman in England, one in Indiana and 11 others scattered over the globe. It didn't give any phone numbers so he typed in a mass message hoping one of them would be her. He looked at Lily again. She smiled and reached over and hit send. There was nothing left to do but wait.

"I know we'll find her."

Check smiled at Lily and squeezed her hand. "I'm sure of it."

After a moment's pause, she asked, "Will you tell me about your phone conversation with your father?" She looked hopeful.

Check smiled so big his eyes nearly disappeared. He told her about the entire conversation and several times tears clouded his eyes. When he stopped, he took Lily's hand and rubbed the back of it with his thumb. "I asked my father to forgive me." His voice cracked and he nodded, "He did."

Lily threw her arms around him. She was so thrilled that she almost knocked him off balance. She jumped to her feet. "I'm so proud of you. We should celebrate."

Check stood and hugged Lily. "I couldn't . . . wouldn't have done it without you pushing me" he whispered in her ear and then leaned back to smile at her showing he held no hard feelings toward her. That's when he noticed that she had removed the drywall paste from that window and cleaned it. He stood smiling at her while confusion started rolling around in his head.

Lily smiled back and hugged him again. This time Check didn't let go so quickly. He remained in the embrace until he felt Lily relax and he could get his thoughts under control. He decided not to say anything further about the window, for now. Instead, he would take his victory. He would celebrate and share his joy with her. And when the crack in her wall finally gave way and left her crumbled, he would show her how to be strong.

With his plan in place, he stepped back. "You are taking me to the best Chinese restaurant in the city."

§

Resurrection

JW Santiago

Chapter Segment from
Paradox Memoirs

Cat's Paw

Zombots have no remorse, fear, or conscience. They carry out orders, to the letter, regardless of how horrific. When people say murderers are cold-blooded, and have dead eyes? The Mob's oldest, most snake-eyed hit-man's got nothing on any given zombot. There is no diplomatic solution to zombots. They cannot be intimidated. They cannot be bought. They cannot be killed, because they are already dead.

Or, mostly so, in Guy's case.

You may remember Risen Organization, from some of my previous ramblings. How they reanimate cadavers, and turn them into mindless soldiers, which I've dubbed "Zombots." Lately, they haven't been too high on my list of priorities. Yeah, what they do is sick and disgusting, but while they have zombies, other people have nukes. And while having zombies and nukes is a distinct possibility, until I find out for sure, they stay around the middle of my list.

So, it came as a complete surprise when Risen launched a frikkin' assault on one of my research outposts, while I was there.

In Canada, of all places. I mean, hell, I stuck an outpost out there for the express purpose of making it low-priority. I think of it as a cabin home, more than anything. I mostly go there to get away from the city, get some work done without a memo popping on the screen every forty-five seconds.

And, of course, my daughters Para and Doxa were right along for the ride. And here I was, thinking middle-of-nowhere Canada would be safer for them. Nope.

The day started out normal enough. Breakfast with the twins, going smoothly. Para bringing sunshine into my dreary world, with her chirping voice, bright colors, and charming quirks. Doxa calmly radiating serene affection, with her warm eyes and gentle voice.

Yeah, again, with the names. Their mother was kind of out of it when they were born, and I couldn't resist. They definitely grew into their names. Can't imagine two sisters being more different, yet complimenting each other so symmetrically.

So, here I was, looking forward to a quiet day of analyzing data collected from over a year of testing some new computer software my techies had developed, when…

A strike team of zombots quietly infiltrates the facility, setting off no alarms and being all sneaky. You know, like a professional squad of hit-men.

Like I said, the outpost itself was low-priority. Software development. And while software is very useful to what I do, Risen has a lot of other options when it comes to busting up my work.

Not to mention, it's difficult to trick my security. Not complicated, just… Difficult. I'll even walk you through it, step by step, to prove that knowing how to break in won't make it any easier.

Like any research facility, we need fresh materials quite often, so getting in isn't that hard. The first layer actually starts with good-old-fashioned bureaucracy. Everyone's got an ID, a reason for being here or there, with forms signed in triplicate for authentication, yadda yadda. It's kind of frustrating to forge all of that.

The second layer of defense is my reputation. I'm

not one to boast, but I'm kind of known for being irrational, implacable, and unforgiving. Give someone like me a lot of influence, power, and money, and you have a very, very good reason not to get my hackles up.

The third layer of defense is my weapons screening system. The short version is that everyone who's supposed to have a weapon is paired up with one via microchip transmitters. If there's a weapon on the facility that I didn't design, and that doesn't pair up with one of the guards' transmitters, security goes off.

Basically, you have to be completely unarmed to get in and jank me.

Which really says something about a zombot's sense of self-preservation, considering they attacked me with nothing but FedEx uniforms and their fists.

I only became aware of the assassination attempt when I heard the most agonized, gut-wrenching shriek you could ever imagine. The kind of shriek you only experience when you're hit with heartbreak, betrayal, and a literal backstab, all at once.

It was Para.

I immediately threw the place into red-alert. Spinning red lights bathed the hall in crimson, while a honking siren alerted security to the presence of threats. I was in pain. The pain only a father can experience when he's getting pain empathy from his little girl.

It. Made. Me. Angry.

I draw my heavy pearl-handled .44 revolver from an inside jacket-pocket, and set off towards Para at a dead-sprint. I navigate through the halls of my outpost with confident familiarity, zeroing in on her waypoint on my map of the building.

Yeah, I have a combat suit I wear at all-times, in the shape of a normal black-and-white checkered business tuxedo. It was in overdrive right now. I was sprinting faster than any human could naturally, and I could shoot jumping fleas as I do so, with the help of a targeting computer attached to my face in the shape of a blank mask.

The purple shoulder-length hair I sport serves no high-tech purpose.

I slide to a stop as I round a corner, tracking what I assume to be Para's assailant. I was very alarmed to see them fighting, hand-to-hand. Para's nanotech was designed to let her avoid the hell out of fights, baiting and switching while Doxa dishes out the heavy hits. Not for her to close in and grapple with her assailants. Doxa was nowhere to be seen, which was even worse. I squint my eyes and level the barrel, trusting the pinpoint accuracy of my targeting tech to nip the fight in the bud. I hone in on his temple, and begin squeezing the trigger.

Para's eyes widen. Light mascara is streaking down her face, she's been sobbing hard for the duration of the fight. "Daddy, no! He needs help, please—"

I get sucker-punched by a zombot from behind, while another sprints from the other end of the hall, ignores Para and her opponent, and bull-tackles me as hard as it can. The first zombot side-steps, avoiding a collision, while the second and I go down hard. My gun barks, filling the hall with the smell of gunpowder, and one of my ears pop from the massive noise in the enclosed space.

I grab the zombot's face, and squeeze. I get one of my fingers into an eye, and my thumb sinks into soft tissue.

I'll spare you the details (as easy as they are to imagine), and leave it at this: I literally rip the thing's face off.

The zombot didn't particularly care. It got its hands around my throat, and I start to buck and heave, trying

to throw him off.

By the way, that's not the smart thing to do when you're being strangled. The massive energy you're using trying to shift that much weight, with horrendously inferior leverage will only use up your oxygen faster. So, as my vision gets a red filter with purple dots, I decide it would be wiser to use my gun. I pull back the hammer of the revolver in my hand, and splatter brains, circuits, and ichor all over the wall.

And of course, it being a zombot, it took another three seconds for the pressure to let up.

For an instant, I feel slow-witted, looking at the smoking gun in my hand. I then grab hold of the corpse's wrist, and fling it at the other zombot (getting blood freaking everywhere, ugh), which… Has a neat hole in its temple. I got freaking lucky with that panic shot from the tackle. Or maybe my targeting computer took care of things. I'd prefer to think the latter, taking comfort in the whole "survival is superior planning" routine.

I focus back onto Para's predicament, noticing that it spilled around the corner into another hallway. I see light blood spatter leading to that direction, fish a speed-loader out of a pocket as I catch up with them. I hear struggling, and two light voices—Doxa must have caught up. Snapping the gun's cylinder back into place, I round the corner, and find Doxa furiously trying to restrain the zombot, and Para leaning against a wall clutching a shallow wound in her side.

I was impressed. Like I said, Para's tech wasn't designed for a straight-up fight. Avoiding them, yeah, but I never knew she could hold up so well mano-y-mano.

Doxa, on the other hand, was having almost no trouble pinning her victim against the wall. The brute strength her nanotech gave her was more than enough to handle one zombot. It was squirming and resisting, and generally making it a nuisance for her, but she was handling it.

Once again, I line up my smoking revolver with the mindless assassin's head… But Doxa twists, getting herself between my gun and her victim. Almost reflexively, I point the weapon towards the ceiling, obeying a combination of gun handling etiquette and fatherly safety paranoia. She beckons towards her sister with a jerk of her head. Knowing Doxa, she probably had a good reason for keeping it alive, or… functioning or whatever, so instead I stride over to Para, examining her wound with a trained eye, and voicing my concerns as I do so.

"Para, what made you close in with a zombot?" I tried to be stern, in an attempt to remind her about caution and grace under pressure, but I just couldn't bring myself to use that tone, seeing her like this. She was still sobbing, even though it looked painful. I peeled back some of the torn fabric around the cut to find purpling and blotchy skin all around her ribs. She clutches at my hair, burying her face on my shoulder, bawling herself sick.

I have never seen her so distraught. I turn my gaze back toward Doxa, who manages a sad glance back over her shoulder. She's on the verge of tears as well. I finally get a good look at the zombot in question, and a ton of lead bricks sink into my gut, and begin to rot like a sour melon.

It was Guy. Guy Xaax. Para's closest childhood friend, from back when the twins were in school. I honestly thought he was the first boy trouble I would have had to deal with as a Father of two daughters, but this was a thousand times worse than I could have imagined.

He was drafted into the American military.

Clearly, Risen is a lot bigger than I thought.

I stand there, staring blankly for a minute, as security troops in. I vaguely take note of them reporting two other neutralized zombots in the facility, a saboteur and wiretap, and even more vaguely order them to restrain and detain Guy. Para looks up at me, smudgy tears falling freely. Through a choked sob, she begs, "Please… Help him. You have to bring him back."

I hug her gently, reassuring her it'll all be okay… the usual baseless parent affirmations. Anything to get the tears to stop. God, do the tears hurt worse than any injury I've ever faced.

***

I had no concept of the depths of Risen's depravity, no idea what I was going to witness from that simple promise to my daughter. Xaax's mind opened Pandora's box, and I dove straight in. The hatred that was born from this single victim of theirs started a war of legendary proportions.

§

Shameless

Meghan Howe

I love my wife. I really do. I love the way her hair falls in curls down to the middle of her back. I love her crooked smile, her straight teeth, and her freckles on her nose. But love just isn't enough to make a man feel wanted. You've got to do a little extra work to make a man feel like he is special, like he is important. After eight years of marriage, the spark has faded like most do. Our time is consumed with dance recitals, football games, and the pitter patter of feet running around the house from dusk to dawn. There is no romance. No alone time. No spark. And that's when I met Rita.

But let me start from the beginning. The beginning of the end, as I like to call it. I first realized my relationship with Sarah was falling apart on a normal Tuesday night in March. Tuesday nights were reserved for family dinners. Between the hustle and bustle of our kids' lives, it was important for us to spend one hour each week spending quality time with each other. Whether quality time meant laughing and joking or yelling and screaming, at least we were together. Until this specific Tuesday in March.

"So, kids, how was school today?" Sarah mumbled, seemingly annoyed with the silence at the dinner table.

"Good," both Katie and Jacob groaned in unison.

And that was it. No more small talk, no more arguments. Just silence. And this, my friends, was the beginning of the end.

For the next week, I continued my normal routine of waking up, getting the kids to school, and heading to my job in the city. I found solace in staring at numbers for nine hours straight for five days a week. Numbers don't have emotions. Numbers don't need foot rubs or errands to run. But my boss notices something different in me.

"Hey, Matt. How's it going? Is something bothering you? You seem a bit preoccupied."

"No, I'm good. Just having a rough couple of weeks. Want to do some golfing this weekend? My wife and kids are going to my in-laws for the weekend and I was planning on sticking around at home."

"Sounds good. How about Saturday morning at Cold Water Trail?"

"It's a date."

My boss is more than a boss. He is a lifetime buddy. We met in middle school and started getting in to mischief not long after. To this day, we have shared memories of proms, funerals, and rehab. Jake took me under his wing after my stint with alcoholism and got me the job down at the bank. Hell, he even set me and Sarah up. I actually named my son after him! I owe my life to that guy.

So after saying goodbye to my wife and kids on that Friday night, I ended up in our four bedroom, two bathroom house all alone. For the first time in years, I felt lonely. Sitting in my recliner, staring at the TV, I came to terms with my failing marriage. I could either put some effort in to it, or I could quit. But the funny thing was, I didn't know what kind of effort to put forth. I worked hard and provided for my family. I sent Sarah flowers and gifts on our anniversary. Shit, our sex life had been pretty good up until just three months ago. But the thing about a flame is, if you don't stroke it, you lose it. And our flame was diminishing faster than the embers in a campfire at dawn.

After flipping through channels for what seemed like hours, I decided to pay a visit to my good ol' bar. Yep, the same bar that comforted me for a long, five years. The same

bar that nearly ruined my life. The same bar that sent me in to rehab. What an idiot, right? But my ego assured me that I was cured. One little glass of scotch wouldn't hurt.

I drove my Volvo over to the bar and parked in the back lot. As I walked in to those double doors, I inhaled that familiar smell of smoke and fried food. My little haven. Even the bartenders haven't changed! My old pal, Simon, was still behind the bar, whipping up all sorts of liquid courage for his loyal customers. But as a made my way up to the bar, I can't help but feel a sense of betrayal on my part. These people were my friends, my confidantes. Although rehab helped me realize how unhealthy my habit was, these guys looked at me like I was a trader, an enemy. I approached the bar, and Simon made his way over to my barstool.

Hey there, stranger. Same as usual?"

"You still remember, Simon? It's been over seven years."

"Oh, Matt, I don't forget my friends."

He side-eyes me and walks over to get me a glass of ice, filling it to the top with some scotch. He whispers to a guy at the end of the bar and they laugh.

"So, Matt. How've you been hanging? How's the fancy job down at the bank?"

"Oh, you know. It's a job. It puts the food on the table, you know. I like what you've done to the place, the jukebox certainly adds some character."

"Yeah, just put a little work in here and there. Trying to compete with the sleazy club down the street. So what made you stop in after seven years of absence?"

"Well, honestly, my marriage sucks. I think between taking care of the kids and working at the hospital, Sarah is just overwhelmed with stuff. She went out to her folks' house for the weekend with the kids. I stayed back and promised to work on some stuff in the yard. But all I've gotten done is drinking this scotch."

"You know, Sarah is a good woman. But every now and then, women need some space. They need some time to escape their routine and just let loose. Give her some time. She will come around."

"Yeah, I just need to back off. Hell, I could use a break in my routine, too. That commute downtown every day is wearing down on me. But thanks for the chat, Simon. I'll probably finish this glass off and head out."

"Alright, you take care of yourself, old man. Tell the kids I said hi."

As he walked away, I began to think about my life before my family, my wife. Although my life revolved around my alcohol, I had the best friends and my weekends were always a party. But I never knew what I was missing until I met Sarah. She brought a light in to my life that made me feel calm, happy even. She gave me the strength to give up the alcohol and start a family. But her strength is no good for me when she's gone. I can't do it on my own.

I'm finishing off the last of my scotch as I hear a whistle from the corner booth. I see an older man graying with wrinkles, staring at the front doors. I turn my head and become dizzy by a sparkly red dress coming through those double doors. Maybe it was the alcohol. Maybe it was my loneliness. But I got butterflies in my stomach and convinced myself to stay for another drink. Her jet black hair stuck straight down her back as she appeared to glide to the man in the corner.

"Oh, stop it, Frank. You see me every Friday. I look no different from last Friday. Except for this dress. You like it?"

"Oh, darlin'. That dress would make anyone fall in love with you. You sure are a looker. I ordered you dirty martini, Simon has it at the bar ready for you."

"You are so sweet, Frank. But I spotted a hand-

some man at the bar in need of attention. You understand, right?"

"Oh sure, honey, you two have fun."

I look around to see the lucky guy, but there is no one surrounding me. Surely she isn't referring to me. Not me, the chunky, pale guy who wouldn't know what to do if this girl threw herself at me. But as she gave the man a wink, she started heading in my direction with a smile that could kill and red lips that lured me in.

"So, stranger, what's your story? You look a bit lost." Although I realized the question was directed toward me, it wasn't registering in my head. The only thing that was registering was the desire to stare at this woman for the entire night.

"Um, excuse me? I mean, Hello. I'm Matt. I'm married." God, I'm so pathetic.

"Well, Matt-who-is-married, do you mind if I steal this seat next to you and have a friendly conversation?"

"Oh please, my pleasure. What's your name?"

"I'm Rita. However, I am not married, if you must know. I am a divorcee of 8 years with no kids and a job that takes up all of my free time. Except the weekends. I come here every Friday night and hang out with Frank and anyone else that may be looking for someone to talk to. What about you? Tell me something about you."

"Uh, well my name is Matt. I guess I already mentioned that… I'm a banker, but I usually just put in my forty hours and spend the rest golfing or spending time with my kids. Oh, and my wife hates me. But that's probably the scotch talking, sorry."

"Oh no, don't be sorry. My ex-husband would love to see me be hit by a train. I understand that feeling. But I guess my next question would be, why would your wife still be with you if she hated you? It didn't take me long to walk away once I realized my ex-husband was a scumbag."

"Well, I mean, hell, marriages are complicated. So are kids. I guess when things get complicated, the easy thing to do is give up. I don't think I've given up, but I think I've stopped going the extra mile to make them happy. But I don't want to bore you with my dull, suburbia life story. I swear I am more interesting than that."

"Well, Matt, interest me."

So believe it or not, for the next two hours, Rita and I sat at that bar, talking about work, dogs, love, food, and anything else that may have crossed our minds. Just me and this woman who had legs that seemed to stretch forever and piercing eyes that cut right through my soul. Her laugh was intoxicating and her way of being attentive no matter what the topic was made me feel special. After four scotches and three martinis later, we were falling off bar stools and cracking each other up with our cheesy jokes and slurred words. A fast-paced song came on over the jukebox and she squealed with excitement.

"Ahh Matt! I love this song! Dance with me! Please!?"

So I got up off of the barstool, grabbed her hand, and took her to an empty part of the bar. Simon's bar didn't have a dance floor, but at one in the morning, we didn't care. She did a couple twirls as I spun her around and before I knew it, my hands were on her hips and the space between our bodies disappeared. I hadn't danced in years and I'm sure that my coordination was less than average, but Rita didn't care. She laughed as I stumbled over her feet and she pecked my cheek as I dipped her near the floor. I pulled her up and she whispered in my ear.

"You sure know how to make a girl happy."

The way those words rolled off of her tongue in-

toxicated me. Those words meant more to be than she would ever know. I grabbed her and pinned her up against the wall, kissing her like I had never kissed a woman before. I forgot how much confidence I gained when I drank. She grabbed my hand and pulled me out of the bar, kissing me the entire time. She gave me her keys and directed me to the black Mustang in the back of the parking lot. I know, I know. Typical. Typical man falling for a beautiful woman. Typical, married man falling for a beautiful woman who isn't his wife. But I didn't know how to stop. No. I didn't want to stop. And as she pulled me in to her apartment, my wife's smile flashed in to my mind. But the sound of Rita's voice asking me to come in wiped her smile away. I'm not proud of it. But I stayed.

The next morning, I found myself in a stranger's bed with a pulsing headache and a foggy memory. I rolled over and thanked God that I had slept on the couch. But I hear something in the kitchen and I begin to walk that direction. I see Rita wearing an oversized shirt with her tan legs poking out. And a rush of emotions came at me. Shame, guilt. But mostly, more importantly, excitement. Passion. Emotions I had been lacking for quite some time. She turns around, blushes and apologizes. But she flashes her smile and I forget everything that I was feeling. For the first time in a long time, I feel special. I feel wanted. I feel me. I feel a connection.

I returned to my suburbia life around five o'clock on Sunday evening. My wife and kids weren't due for two more hours, so I treated myself to some Chinese take-out and a cold beer. I walked in to the kitchen and realized I had left my cell phone on the counter the entire weekend. This was bad news. I had forgotten to call my wife and I'm sure I had a thousand calls and text messages from her, worried sick. But to my surprise, and slight dismay, I had not a single call or text from her. I did, however, have several missed phone calls from a very worried Jake, mentioning our previous golfing plans. Shit.

Sarah and the kids get home about fifteen minutes later than expected, but I was excited to see them. Both Katie and Jacob come running up to me, telling me about all of their weekend adventures. Sarah flashed me a fake smile and began to unload her suitcases. Not a kiss. Not even a hello. Which made me want Rita even more.

For the next week, I left early for work and stopped by Rita's apartment to have breakfast. Her cooking was sub-par, but our conversations made up for it. And, of course, looking at her was one of my favorite things to do. But mornings were all we had. I didn't want to sacrifice my time with the kids in the evening, but selfishly, I wanted the mornings to spend with my girlfriend.

Girlfriend. That was the first day I had made the connection.

After two straight weeks of eating breakfast with Rita, I decide to wake up early and take the kids to school. Maybe it would make my time with Sarah a little more bearable if I helped her out.

I drop the kids off at school, and head into work, trying to avoid any contact with Jake. For the past few weeks, he has been suspicious of my behavior. Apparently being happy is unusual for me. Go figure.

I did my normal number crunch for the day and snuck out twenty minutes early so I could beat my wife home. I pulled up to the driveway around a quarter to five and sat in my car, just admiring the home that Sarah and I have worked so hard for. So many memories, both good and bad. I thought about me and Sarah's wedding

day, about how beautiful she looked in white. I thought about how great our first year of marriage was. And then came along the kids. We have had a rich life together. Is it really worth it to trade in this life for one with Rita? Rita brought a sense of spontaneity in to my life that I had never felt with Sarah. But the love that Sarah and I had could move mountains. Hell, it convinced me to give up my very first love, alcohol. And I'm not one to give up. On anything.

I walk up the paved sidewalk toward the front door, hoping that Sarah had returned early from work as well. Sure enough, the door was unlocked. I twisted the doorknob and walked on in, expecting Sarah to be making up a snack for her and the kids. I caught a glimpse of her in the kitchen, her ringlets hanging around her face, giggling at God knows what. I walked in and shot her a smile, craving that flirtation we used to have. She caught my eye and froze, staring at me with worry. I walked in and saw. I saw him. A man about three inches taller and 20 pounds lighter. A man with more muscle tone than I would ever dream of. A man that I had trusted my entire life with. Jake. My very best friend. And it all clicked. It all came together. Her cold attitude toward me was caused by her new relationship with Jake. And at that moment on a Tuesday afternoon, I broke down. I just cried.

The funny thing about life is, the less effort you put in, the less everyone else will put in. The more distant I became, so did Sarah. She needed love just as much as I did. But I never did mention my month with Rita. Call me selfish, call me an asshole, but I wanted her to feel the guilt of ruining our marriage. I blame my actions on the selfish ideals of the human race. But my exciting, spur-of-the-moment time with Rita ended in an abrupt halt.

You see, Rita was great. But her spontaneity ended up being one of her downfalls. And I guess one of mine. She accepted a new job somewhere in South America. One week she was here, the next she was gone. I didn't even get a phone call. Just a lousy letter with a short apology. We were never going to work out. We just found solace in feeling the same emotion that no human being ever wants to feel. Loneliness.

Yeah, I loved my wife. But love just wasn't enough. Instead of comforting each other in our hard times, we searched for companionship in the wrong places. And what do I have to show for it? A one-bedroom apartment and every other weekend with my kids.

She has Jake.

§

Stranger on a Bus

Daniel Bazan

On the morning of his big day, James waited for his bus at the usual time. Once it arrived slightly late, he went to his familiar spot, next to the thin-walled pivot in the bus and facing the aisle. He placed his suitcase between his feet and sat hunched over, looking down. The bus stopped twice after he came aboard, both times picking up four people. The seats surrounding him filled with fellow commuters on their way to their respective destinations at six-thirty in the morning. None acknowledged another and James kept sitting, staring at his suitcase, waiting for his stop. In about thirty to forty minutes, this bus full of silent and tired people would reach the block of James' office, where he would begin his day. At the third stop after his own, a man sat in the empty seat immediately to James' left.

"That's a nice suit you're wearing."

"Thanks." James did not look up. His eyes fixed towards the floor, he glimpsed the stranger's black leather shoes in his periphery.

"A nice, grey suit, briefcase, and short cropped hair matching a clean shaven youthful face? Let me guess. You must work downtown."

James raised his head to see the bus around him: full of varied city dwellers, yet completely silent, apart from the starts and stops from the bus' pressurized brakes and the occasional rotten-egg-smelling, sulfuric backfire from a faulty muffler, otherwise typical for an early morning bus ride. The only other noise within the vehicle was the voice from the man to James' left. A woman a few seats away glanced towards the source of the conversation. James looked back at his feet as he replied.

"That's right. Main Street."

"Yeah, that figures. I always see suits like you downtown. You must work for a shipping agency or something, right?"

The bus stopped. Two people stood and exited. Two more stepped on and filled the vacated seats. The sun was rising outside, but two-story apartment buildings blocked the dawn light, leaving a grim blue-grey color to fill the bus.

"You're going to kill your boss today, right?"

The bus started forward as James looked up again, this time towards the stranger sitting to his left. He saw a thin man with short brown hair wearing a dark blue suit similar in design to his own.

"Excuse me?"

"I said: You work for a shipping firm, right?"

The man was looking James right in the eyes with faded grey irises of his own.

"Oh. Yeah, I do. Mercer International on Main. How did you know?"

"Lucky guess, I suppose. I tend to make all kinds of lucky guesses." His voice was calm, almost monotone.

James shrugged and looked around the bus. The dim aura of early dawn was gradually brightening as the sun ascended further. No one paid mind to their conversation anymore. Silence resumed aboard the bus as a minute passed.

"So what's your story, Mister 'Mercer International Shipping Agent'? I've never seen you on this bus before. Where're you from?"

James' gaze returned to his suitcase.

"I take this bus every morning. Been doing so for seven years now."

"Seven years. That's neat." The man shifted in his

seat. "I must admit, I lied about not seeing you on this bus before. I was just nudging for some conversation. I'm a stranger to this area, you see. Doing some business scouting downtown."

James shrugged again.

"So where're you from? Live in the city all your life?"

"Michigan. Upper Peninsula."

The bus hissed to a stop. Five people stepped out the side doors, as six more shuffled past to find a seat. The man shifted again, crossing his legs with his right ankle upon his left knee.

"Michigan, eh? You must've spent your whole childhood fishing up there. Four days a week, most likely. Not including family outings every summer, of course."

James sat up, shifting his suitcase between his feet. The bus regained motion as the last newcomers took their places. People began sharing seats.

"Yeah, that's right. Fished in the rivers and lake all the time, especially in the summer. How did you guess that?"

"Another lucky guess, more than likely. I do that a lot." The man pulled his sleeve back to check his wristwatch. "You married? 'Course you are. Handsome guy like you?"

James glanced at the stranger, who was no longer looking back at him with his grey eyes. Instead, he was staring straight ahead of him, across the aisle, towards an empty seat on the left side of the bus. James hunched over again and resumed staring at his feet.

"Yeah. Married for five years now."

"Lucky man. Not often one finds someone and makes it last."

James shrugged.

The bus stopped again, audibly filling its brakes with air. No one left at this stop, but seven people entered. Looking up, James saw nearly all the seats were taken. People would have to start standing soon.

"So you came to the city to study, and wound up sticking with a job that paid the bills, whether or not you enjoyed it. Is that so?"

"Right again." James sighed and checked his own wrist watch. Six forty-three.

"Shipping can't be that bad, though, right? Probably gets boring after a couple of years, but what job doesn't? No reason for you to hate it so much."

The newly entered commuters finished getting situated as the bus crept to another start. A man towards the front stood up to let an older woman sit down and went to hold a ceiling bar.

"Who said I hate my job?"

"Please. Who doesn't hate their job, especially after seven years? Hell, even I hate my job. People who hate their jobs are a dime a half-dozen."

Noise started to creep in from without the bus as the city began to awaken. The street outside was now filling with cars passing beneath the windows around James and the stranger. A steady wind brushed past the bus, as the weather breathed life into the calm morning. James sat up again.

"Look, don't worry about it."

"Whatever you say, James."

James looked at the stranger again. He was still staring at the seat across from them, this time containing a young woman who was seemingly asleep.

"Did you guess my name, too?"

"I read it. On your briefcase."

James looked down at his suitcase. Between the locks and under the handle was his first name grafted

into a metal plate. He moved his leg to conceal it.

"Mind telling me your name?"

"Don't worry about it, James."

James coughed lightly.

"Look, if you don't mind, I would like to have some silence before I go into work."

Two minutes passed and the man said nothing. The bus came to another stop. Five people got up, eight people got on. Three more stops. The third would be James'. The stranger sighed and checked his watch again.

"I know what you've been thinking, James."

James looked at the stranger; the grey eyes met his again, dulled and emotionless, examining him.

"You've been thinking about your mother. You were never quite the same after she passed."

Passengers shuffled in front of the two men, the bus continued, as did the stranger.

"Your father still hasn't spoken to you or your brother since that day. Must have been rough for a kid right out of high school to lose both parents, one way or another."

The bus came to another stop letting seven more people on and no one off. James started.

"What are you talking abou-"

"I'm talking, James. Please don't interrupt. It irritates me." His voice flared with a tinge of anger. The man checked his watch again. "My stop is almost here, so I would appreciate it if you did not waste my time."

The bus' engine backfired and rose to a gentle roar as they merged on to a major downtown avenue. James frowned and looked away from the man. He shifted in his seat and checked his own watch: six fifty-five.

"I know you've been unhappy, James, and that's putting it very lightly. I know why you sit here next to the bus pivot, where it's noisy and stinks from the engine, so that no one will sit next to you. I know why you brush off your colleagues day after day at your job, and why you sit oh so quietly to, in, and from your place of business."

The bus reached another stop, the streets now surrounded by skyscrapers of a busy downtown, and let out a sharp hiss as the doors opened. This time many people exited and many more got on. The jumbling of exiting and entering passengers prevented James from counting, though his focus had shifted from such things. The man continued, and the bus lurched ahead.

"I know what's in your briefcase, James. And I know why it's in there. I know why you really hate that job of yours. It's all because of your boss isn't it, James? Good ol' Mr. Thomas Williams. The man who doesn't seem to recognize the effort you put forth every day for the past seven years, does he, James?" The stranger's voice had transitioned from a near monotone to a louder taunting as he spoke directly at James. No one near them seemed to notice the loudening of his voice.

"Now, Mr. Williams has been screwing that lovely wife of yours. But you already know that, don't you, James? In fact you just found proof last night when you discovered a very Mr. Thomas Williams-esque tie underneath your bed. Of course, you already suspected something like this was happening, didn't you, James? Please, stop fidgeting, James. Try to listen to what I have to say." His voice became thick with derision. "That office party last year, your lovely Evelyn was practically all over Tommy Williams, at least when she thought you weren't looking. And that created the thought in your mind, a thought that never left. So, you kept searching for proof you never wanted to find. But you found it, didn't you? And now you're here, on your way to work with that briefcase of yours. And now I'm here, sitting

next to you, to tell you to do it. Don't look at me like that, James. It's what you wanted to hear all along, isn't it? Rationalization. Justification. So, here I am to give you that final push."

The man produced a black-and-white argyle necktie from within his coat and placed it in James' lap. A strong heat was emanating from the tie.

"Now, I know what you did in your apartment last night once your sweet Evelyn came home. I know what you did with that same something you're carrying in that briefcase of yours." He gestured towards the suitcase between James' feet. "So, once again: do it. Give it to that son-of-a-bitch. You're already halfway there. You always said you wanted to get out of your job with a bang; might as well make it a literal one. Some final words of advice before my stop, James: don't miss."

James looked at the man, whose once dulled eyes seemed to be brighter than before as they looked through him. James then moved his gaze towards the tie sitting in his lap. It felt as if it was getting hotter, softly heating through his upper pant legs. James spoke.

"You're out of your mind."

The man looked at James with impatience on his face.

"Whatever you say, James."

The bus came to a stop.

"This one's mine, James. Remember what I said." He stood and checked his wristwatch. "Seven in the morning. Right on time. For me, at least. You'd better hope your bus gets you to work on time, James. Wouldn't want to be late for your big day."

Sunlight broke between the towering skyscrapers and entered the windows of the bus, introducing a bright orange light to the blue-grey aura. The man winked at James with shining grey eyes, walked down the aisle, and left the bus. James watched through the window as the man walked down the bustling street until the bus jerked forward, away from the stop.

James looked down at his lap to find no argyle tie where one had been before. The engine below backfired and let a sulfuric scent seep through the thin pivot walls as the bus reached James' stop on Main Street.

James stood, dusting himself off, trying to brush the smell away from him. He grabbed his suitcase, and felt the small, heavy, metallic object shift within. Gently edging between the sea of standing passengers, he stepped off the bus and stood, staring down busy Main Street. For a minute he watched the city around him, tirelessly bustling past under the newborn morning sun. James shuffled his suitcase between his hands several times before slowly stepping away from the bus stop. He took a deep breath and continued on his usual path towards his office, towards his big day.

§

Striving After Dawn

Lane Lareau

"Don't worry, I'll be there … Yes, I'll make it there by sun up."

A goodbye was coming, and for Jason Merrow, the goodbye would be easy. It was the realization of time long lost that would bring darkness at dawn.

Jason diverted a tear as he plopped his smart phone onto polyester bed sheets in a small yet spacious apartment in downtown Portland. Slipping out onto the 15th floor patio, he slowly breathed in the evening's northwestern breeze. Beneath him, the Willamette mirrored the lights that continued to pump life into the city as its residents nestled in for a restful sleep. The twilight's glimmer waved upon his Rolex watch as he glanced at the time. Just after two in the morning; five hours stood before his trek and the end.

He stepped back into his quiet abode, catching sight of a simple, etched piece of paper hanging beside his bed. Could it be nearly four years already? There was so much excitement. Anticipation. Life. Versed in marketing with a heart that beat for social justice, Jason excelled at his work, receiving honors and recognition from faculty and students alike. Yet not a name could be remembered. Merely faces accompanied the cheers and applause and caps frozen in the air but for a moment. Time sped on, erasing the past from beneath his feet like the darkest night falling with the coming daybreak.

A ding averted his attention, focusing his eyes upon the soft glow of a sleek, silver laptop that sprawled itself upon the mahogany desk. The number "47" flashed, noting the incoming wire messages received since midnight. The city was settling in, but the rest of the world hustled unapologetically. Every line of pixels encapsulated Jason, who failed to notice hands unwavering. With every passing moment, they twitched through confined space, speaking of brevity and succumbing any whose ears reverberated its consistent sound of stress and fatigue. Jason smiled, soothed by a quaint couple's portrait unmoved behind the endless messages. Jade Frappay. What a stunningly impossible find. Who would've thought the strict routines of normalcy could have won the hand of such an astonishing woman.

Every morning at six o' clock sharp, Jason popped in his favorite corner bakery on 14th and Kearney. The coffee was second rate, but if it was for the coffee, there were dozens of better selections. No, it was simply her joyous greeting that brought life to his day; her hazel eyes that glistened under the shadow of her bronzed tresses.

"Mornin', Jay. Be it a good ol' Americano for you? Five sugars. Extra cream. A shot of vanilla to go change the world one slogan at a time?"

"Do you know every customer this well? Or are you just helping this old joint stay open by making every young man up and down Portland grab their morning coffee just to see you?"

"You may never know," she chuckled. "You'll just hafta keep comin' to find out."

What a stupid line. Had to start somewhere I guess, Jason thought as he packed a pair of pants snuggled beside his laptop and notepad within his duffle. One month of time stood between him, her sweet, southern "I do," and a lifetime adventure with her by his side. The incessant tick of his watch jarred Jason's for once rested

mind. His four hour drive remained. Nostalgia and marriage would have to wait.

The next three hours traced an empty portrait of time, weighing upon what stood ahead as jabbering radio hosts, the hum of his electric engine, and the moon's steady pace across the night sky shared his company. The orange hint of morning's arrival beckoned a return to reality, triggering fragments of a life that time held prisoner; a life before schedules and deadlines, endless travels and communiqués.

As Jason journeyed through the outskirts of his hometown, congregations of wheat welcomed his return. In the distance, a speck of light painted a steeple, hovering above corridors he had called home many years before.

Splashes of color trickled upon the pews of the cavernous sanctuary as industrial-styled lamps hung above like stalagmite, blurring traditional with modernity. Within its vast embrace sat Jason and his little brother, busily doodling another stenciled comic book while the dynamic pastor engaged the Sunday sitters in his conclusion of Ecclesiastes. Cries of new life echoed in the background accompanied by the soft whisper of artificiality sustaining feeble souls nearly snapping the silver cord.

Jason slipped to his side, glancing at the freshly printed bulletin; a young boy's moment of escape as the sermon waned. He noted the mention of his Sunday school teachers, Mr. and Mrs. Vive, announcing the birth of their baby girl, Gemma Rae. But joy in their celebration was severed, catching sight of funeral details for Ms. Vieil. The long-time member of the church faithfully sat three rows behind Jason and his family, providing him and his brother sweet, miniature caramel treats every Sunday. He closed the bulletin, attempting to shake the melancholy cloud that hung low upon his chest. "Why does this happen?" he mumbled.

"Life is short, my friends – a vapor, in fact," the charismatic leader continued. "And if there is one thing the writer of these ancient words of wisdom would want you to know, it is that all of life is vanity apart from God. Some of you are young with all your life ahead of you. 'Rejoice, O young man, in your youth…' the writer exhorts. 'Remember…before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened…and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it.'"

Light is sweet, and it is pleasant for the eyes to see the sun…but let him remember that the days of darkness will be many. All that comes is vanity. "All is vanity," Jason whispered into the breeze of the Idahoan morn. The reign of night was coming to an end, yet shaded thoughts of resentment permeated his mind. The sun was rising while darkness set in his heart. The astral ascent reminded Jason his time was short. With each passing wave of light, the pulse of time grew fainter for the one he loved.

As he baited his four-cylinder to its crest, Jason peeled across iron rails of the town's yesteryears, thudding upon a gravel road. Swirls of dirt danced in the shadows of the casted trees, belittled by the towering poles making night day with each flip of the switch.

Choirs of crickets joined the symphony of boys' chatter, distracting the young man who stood ninety feet from safety. The peg of aluminum rested lightly upon his shoulder as camera shutters and embarrassing shouts of encouragement rose from his favorite fan

settling in the bleachers. Mom. She never missed his games. Never forgot her camera too. He set his gait toward his enemy while looking to coach and dad for guidance and direction on his next move. Guidance and direction offered at each juncture of his journey. With each day of triumphs and each string of defeats, his dad was there. Jason smiled at the thought and glanced at the pitcher. Fail and life would continue. Succeed and the game would be clinched. The whip of bleached leather pierced the empty air, instantaneously loaded by the crack of a gong and the ovation melodiously charting its way from the stands.

Three championships. Hours of practice, tears, and sweltering summer heat. Loading and receiving sweaty piles of grass-stained flesh five days a week, four months of the year. Fifteen years of life. All labors meaninglessly toiled under the sun. "Such wasted years," Jason murmured, flipping a salutation to every vehicle driven on the narrow, pebbled highway. The remembrances continued. Houses. Restaurants. Schools. He maneuvered his hybrid passed a rusted pickup, chugging along unaware. His mind could not avoid the growing bleakness.

Why can I not enjoy the simplicity of life? No spurts of road rage. Friends as friends and never secret enemies. Ignorance unknown to innocent minds. Political correctness incorrectly applied. "Then life happens," Jason fumed. The blur of the countryside echoed the fragmented recollections of his past. He struggled to free himself, if only for a moment, from the complexities he called life. But the pangs of reality swallowed any joys his upbringing attempted to recover.

Friendly gestures become mistaken curses. Friends steal, kill, and destroy every dream, relationship, and source of delight. To be ignorant is foolish; to be innocent is unwise. Communication is merely a means to an end, an extra zero on the dotted line, special smiles to attract important people. His cell phone shattered the silent noise of his mind, uttering reminders of voicemails unheard and emails unread. Jason silenced and chucked the device upon the leather seat.

As a child, such things were toys; pieces of acrylic plastic fooling young minds into adulthood. Now, they are ticks sucking time from days off; hubs of information funneling work's memos at home, deadlines on leisure, and coworkers with family. His phone flashed to life once again. Left in its wake was a simple plea. You're running out of time.

Reaching the last bend of his journey, Jason spotted it. His home nestled behind trees burnt by time. How bittersweet it was. How typical his arrival. Since starting his position at the firm, it seemed only holidays and funerals granted him hellos and goodbyes to the family and friends he loved. He coasted onto the blacktop lane that settled beside the white-picket porch with crimson shutters welcoming visitors into its homely frame. The day had yet to filch the liquid diamonds gracefully resting upon the freshly-cut lawn. Mums and petunias littered the drive like subjects surrounding the coming of a king. Jason rotated and stepped out of his metal encasement of airbags and glass, firmly standing upon familiar ground.

Ground that hosted many epic battles. Boys and girls alike entrenched in warfare that spanned the seasons. Summer months witnessed guns loaded with fluid arsenals of quenchable destruction and rubbery shells of water. Save for the dinner call and the ringing bells of autumn, such contests had no end. Not even

winter's hush could silence its combatants. At first snowfall, war was declared. The driveway divided the warmongers as immense forts of condensed slush loomed above its cowering occupants. Ammo stockpiles rained from above, providing assistance for the childish games. Jason patted his last line of defense, an ice mortar that would annihilate whatever feeble defenses construed from his brother a mere thirty feet away. He hesitated, unwilling to destroy the work his brother labored to produce. Yet no sooner had the war begun that spring's advent and regenerating showers would force truces between the rivals, destroying what marvelous structures Jason willfully let stand.

What strivings after the wind these naïve days were for us, Jason deduced. We strategized and planned for days on end, only to see our efforts melted by time. What fools we were. He welcomed himself into his former dwelling, unanswered by an old friend. There in the corner of the living room lay scragginess with four protruding limbs of youth now bent with frailty and aches. "Hello, buddy. Good to see you, old pal." Shimmers of day ushered with them memories that no simple page can contain. Pictures and portraits hung like windows into what once was. Friends distanced by land. Families separated by time. Traditions disarrayed by to-do lists. Jason broke down, sobbing tears of vaporous grief. He knew what remained. He paced through the kitchen, absent of any fragrances nearly forgotten. How he loved to awake to the aroma of ovens roasting Thanksgiving dinner and pans frying a Saturday morning breakfast unfit for royalty. Yet pensiveness squeezed the last of his time as he approached the foyer.

Creeping up the sullen steps, Jason noticed sunlight beneath the door of the bedroom like lights so often seen as a child. Each step a mine field to sidestep and meander through the hallway without setting off alarms that alerted his parents of their son's arrival or escape. Darkened passages guiding a young sleepwalker into confusion, only to be saved and comforted by a mom whose ever-present ears captured her son's weeping in the stillness of the night.

The door to the bedroom creaked to life, exposing Jason to death's silent sobs that filled the void. Once more, time had stolen a moment of life. Once more, he was too late.

There, the dancing stars of dust that flickered in the morning's wretched rays caressed a face of peace and joy; a lifeless shell of one whom he loved. A soul no longer plagued by insidious cells that shattered and destroyed. A life no longer shared. The harvest was done.

Goodbye was all he could muster. Goodbye was the only thing time had left him to give.

§

The City

Joi Mouseley

Mom's dialysis nurse, Lynda, tipped us off. "There will be a few openings at the hospital in the next town over," she said. "They are looking for extra help now that the big merger is over. Tell Leah to apply now before they put an ad in the paper. Everyone and their cousin will be vying for those positions once word gets out."

When I went to pick momma up in our rusty little car, the nurse could barely get her inside fast enough before she started telling me the news.

"We got to go to the library now!" screamed Momma.

"Why?" We don't have the gas to go and fool around at the library now," I said.

"Don't you worry about that, she responded, just get there. There will be an opening at the hospital and we got to get the application filled out right now. You're the only one who knows about this at the moment and Nurse Lynda said that she would put in a good word for you. You got to get to this first, Leah. An opportunity like this doesn't come around often in this neck of the woods and the hospital will even help you go to school."

School. That was honestly the last place I was thinking of going if I got this job. Where I wanted to go was anywhere outside this decrepit city. Once a booming steel town, not even steel itself could keep the city from eventually collapsing under the weight of greed. Seeking cheaper labor, the mills crossed the ocean and left the citizens behind to fend for themselves. Those who could not escape the incoming tide of poverty had to stand by and watch the city slowly erode. The buildings downtown were gradually overtaken by native trees and the creatures that inhabited them. Graffiti soon covered everything that could be written on. Sidewalks buckled and roads looked like concrete minefields. Within a few years the city no longer resembled the prosperity it once represented. It now looked more like the brown, decayed teeth of a hobo.

My parents were employees of the steel mills. That is until they were laid off at around the same time. But unlike the hundreds of other citizens who fled seeking a better life my parents stayed, hoping that things would turn around for the better. Maybe my dad had a premonition or something, I really don't know what he was thinking. But my mom and I woke up one day and he was gone. He took most of our stuff and all of the valuables, leaving me, young junior, and momma in a city engulfed in deepening poverty. We were now in over heads with no way out. Momma's health took a turn for the worse from the stress of being abandoned by both my father and the job she hoped would give her the American dream. The resulting medical bills sucked up the little money I got from working nights at the club. The monthly government assistance checks were the only thing that kept us from actually drowning.

But maybe we will finally be rescued. I filled out the application the night Lynda told us about the position and a week later, which was yesterday, I got a call for an interview.

Momma and Junior were hollering and saying, "You got it Leah, you got it!" They were jumping around and yelling so much you would have thought that we won the lottery, which would have been nice. Junior's young mind had already wondered onto Christmas and his birthday, and he started talking about how they all would be different after I got the job.

"Nothing's going to be too different, not for a

while," I reminded him. But truthfully my mind wondered right with his. He is a good little boy, never asking for anything and never complaining about not having much. Maybe because he grew up with other kids like him and don't know that things could actually be better. But with this job, I imagined, as soon Christmas rolled around I would buy as many gifts for him and mom as I could afford. I would buy a real tree like the ones we used to see in those cliché Christmas movies before we gave away the television. It would be a fluffy evergreen that would fill up the house with the fresh scent of new life. Multicolored boxes would spill from underneath our immaculate tree onto the bare floor, where I would stand and watch my baby brother dive into the pile of Christmas gifts like the ball pit at McDonald's.

Momma's more realistic expectations brought me back to reality. She started talking about all of the stuff we pawned off that could be bought back with my new job and how we could get the cellphone turned back on. "Now hold on, I said. I don't have the job yet. We are getting our hopes up too high. Besides, I am pretty sure I am not the only one they are going to interview and we don't even know if they will hire someone like me."

"But you were the first to apply for this position," said Momma. "And Lynda put in a good word for you. If I'm remembering right, I think she mentioned that she and the supervisor are good friends. You got this Leah", she reassured me. I wanted to get just as excited as everyone else, I really did. But I knew better. This city had a way of keeping you here.

While reminiscing about the excitement of yesterday, I almost lost track of time sitting by the window. With the television gone, I usually occupied my free time babysitting my little brother while Momma was at the clinic or staring at the scenery outside the window. The familiarities of my surroundings were oddly comforting to me when I was stressed about something. I badly wanted this job, or more so, I needed it. I needed it so I could escape these very surroundings. The boarded up and hollowed out homes. The shaky, twitchy, men and women that occupied said houses for a couple of hours a day, reemerging wide eyed and clothes streaked with what I hoped was dirt. The skinny saplings, weeds, and overgrown bushes that formed makeshift fences. Through all this familiarity there was a definite bleakness that always gave me an urge to run.

I peeled myself off of the lawn chair situated by the window and attempted to smooth the lines out of my skin. I headed to a garbage bag filled with what was left of my closet and grab a pink button down and a snug pair of dress pants. As I got dressed, I let my mind fill with optimistic visions of our possible future. My mind leapt outside of our rundown house and past the neighborhood. It went all the way to the town over, where the hospital was located. That's where Nurse Lynda lived. I imagined us living a lot more modest than she, but way better than what we had now. I pictured us living in one of those nice apartments that I saw last time Momma stayed at the hospital, with the white washed wood balconies and bike trails that encircled the complex. There would be Victorian lampposts every few blocks and the playground would have all the swings still intact. "Junior would really love that", I said to myself. The buildings would be void of graffiti and the streets smooth and black like licorice. Neighbors would be seen at night walking their dogs and fearlessly greet my family and I with a genuine smile. This would all take some time to accomplish on my salary alone, but the chance that it could actually happen was so exciting.

I finished getting dressed and reminded myself

to be realistic. It was not going to be easy to move up from where we were. But the thoughts made me feel as though I already had the job. I put on my scuffed church shoes, checked myself one last time in the fractured bathroom mirror and headed outside with a smile. "I got this, I think I got this. I am young , street smart, and I'm willing to work hard. I am the best candidate," I tried to convince myself. I hopped in the rust covered Cavalier and shut the door. I sat in the worn seats for a second and took a long look at our neighborhood. It was honestly a scary place which would send most people running. But other than poverty, my family and I had no other reason to run. What was there to be scared of? Nobody's going to bother you when you ain't got nothing. But we were tired of having nothing. Maybe in a few weeks or months we would actually be able to leave this little island of despair behind and sail off to a better land. Maybe we would have finally broken free.

I started the car, backed out of the weed infested driveway, and headed down the street. The old heap gave a good start, coughed a few times and rolled to a stop. I painfully dug my nails into the steering wheel and slowly looked at the gas gauge. It was almost half full. So…what the fuck could be wrong with this piece of shit? We spent our last dollars filling this heap up with gas so I could go to that damn interview and now this? I knew I should have just taken the bus in the first place. The bus. That was my only option at this point since no one was home to help me out with that damn thing. So I unclenched my hands from around the steering wheel, grabbed my purse and ran to the nearest gas station. I couldn't waste time being pissed, I had to get some cash before the bus arrived.

I ran for what seemed like forever, passing one of the twitchy crackheads along the way. "Where you going so fast? Nowhere, that's where!" he said as I sped down the sidewalk. I ignored him and kept running until I got to the gas station. By then I was covered in a thin layer of sweat but I figured I could freshen up in the bathroom. I went inside and couldn't find anybody else but the cashier behind the Plexiglas. He had known me and my baby brother since we walked here sometimes to buy juice and milk.

"Excuse me, but I desperately need money for the bus. I will trade you what's left on my food card for cash. Please, please, please I need to get to a job interview in a half an hour," I begged him.

"What, no I can't do that, he responded. Do I look like an ATM?"

"But you know me, I responded." I buy shit here all the damn time! Help me get out of this damn place and let me at least borrow five bucks until tomorrow."

"What? No! Unless you are going to buy something, get out of my store!"

I glared hard at the little man. "You're lucky you're behind that window or I would whoop your ass," I hiss back.

I shoved the glass door open as hard as I could as I left and plopped down on the crumbling sidewalk. In this barren city, not even a gas station gets more than a handful of customers, and that day of all days it seemed like the stream of customers was particularly low. But every customer that did come through, I asked if I could make a trade or if they could spare some change. They either said no or ignored me altogether.

Five minutes before the start of the interview, I gathered the nerve to go back inside the store.

"You are back? This time I am going to call the police!" the little man yells.

"No, I mutter, I just need to use your phone.

Please?" He stared at me through narrowed eyes and handed me the cordless through the turnabout. I called the interviewer.

"Hello, this is Kim of human resources. How may I help you?" she said in a chipper voice.

"Hi, this is Leah Carroll and I have an interview today but I am having car trouble. Is there any way I can reschedule?"

"Um…well you are calling five minutes before you are due to be here and I am only interviewing people today for the current openings, she responded through her nose. If we are hiring again in the future I encourage you to just reapply, ok?"

"Ok,um,well thanks anyway."

"No problem, have a great day."

"Sure," I managed to choke out.

I tossed the phone on the table. "Hey, you not going to put that back inside the turntable?" yelled the cashier through the glass. Ignoring him I headed back outside, back into the bleakness and familiarity of the neighborhood. Every cell in my body wanted to scream. I wanted to rip out all my hair. I wanted to run back home and rip that car to shreds. Tear it up like aluminum foil and turn it back into the heap of scraps that it was. Could I actually walk all the way to that hospital just to punch Kim in her annoyingly cheerful face for not even letting me reschedule?

I started the excruciating walk back home, vision blurred with hot tears. I wondered how would my family take the news? I hadn't even made it one block from the gas station when I ran into that homeless drug fiend again. "See, I told you, he said. You ain't going anywhere," and laughed a wheezy, phlegm filled laugh interrupted by a fit of coughs that caused his whole body to jerk. His disgusting laugh and resulting convulsions stopped me in my tracks. I turned and looked at him, and through my tears all I saw was a mouth full of brown, decayed teeth.

§

Blame it on the Weather

Joi Mouseley

Guilt is heavy, ominous.
Doubt is a constant storm.
Together, they turn a usually bright Sunday
into a dark and gloomy day.
As if a wet, black cloak
has blanketed the sky.
Surrounding air so wet and dense
that the mind and body is weighed down
and drags through the day.
So when mom asks
why I haven't been to church,
I just tell her I couldn't make it
because of the weather.

Photo: Courtney Lorenz

Breathless

Patrick Pohrte

Click, Clack, Click, Clack,
Each step she takes is my vision becoming clearer,
Her figure of the hour glass to which I am the sand
The heart of a lion races with red,
the color of passion that would make a rose envious,
My mind fills with the screams of compliments and praises to say as she approaches
The voices are yelling, 'SAY SOMETHING! SAY SOMETHING TO HER!"
But like the breeze that goes through the window,
When time comes I am silent,
I am breathless; I am the ice man,
Maybe, just maybe, I'll get to feel that breeze touch my face again,
And the sound of car crashes, of fireworks, of orchestras will echo from my mouth to the breeze
for her to hear and notice me.
She is my Venus, my Aphrodite, my muse,
She is my shooting star,
Maybe next time, I won't be parched to let the words flow like a waterfall to tell paradise of her
beauty.
But for now, I stay the sand through the hour glass, the breeze through the window, the drops of
water in that waterfall,
All of which are so small that no one seems to notice them.

Easter in Amsterdam

Phil Siemer

Amsterdam's only hostel that doesn't
take reservations lies just a short
stumble away from the train station
toward the red light district, its
inhabitants hidden by an unassuming
brick exterior. Almost modern.
I check in, pay five extra Euros for
a locker: my own fifty-five gallon drum
and padlock. Though noon's passed, over
twenty of the thirty-some bunk beds
in my room are still occupied. My
fellow sojourners--their itineraries
must read like advertisements for home
drug-testing kits--roll over, kick sheets
off, snore, or stare as I remove my
toiletries and place my rucksack deep
within the shadows of the drum.
My bare feet stick to the floor as I walk
to the bathroom, which emits the scent
of stale vomit. I touch as little of the thin
plastic curtain of the shower as I can.
Brown on the bottom, it becomes a dull
yellow on top. I lather myself, hoping
some effort to fight the filth can have an
effect. Lighting a match in the Grand Canyon.
Back in my room, afraid to turn on the lights
and disturb the denizens, I find no towel
bar. Having draped my towel over the spray-painted
locker to dry, I leave this hell hole to wander the
streets. You can always identify the drug

dealers by their eyes, searching for
any open connection. Peyote, Hashish,
they whisper as they zig-zag behind me.
In a bar I meet two other ex-pats, lesbians
who invite me to midnight mass with them.
Thai women in lingerie and high heels bang
on windows as we walk the cobbled streets
to church. In the service I understand only
fragments of my ancestors' hymns. We hug
goodnight. Walking home, past the hookers
who see me through the depravity that pays their
bills, alone, I learn more about God than
any sermon in Highland, Indiana, could ever
teach. Tonight I'll sleep on a bare mattress,
without a pillow.

Eye Contact

Thomas Trottier

They lined his pockets
With pennies,
Slipped blocks of wood into the soles of his only pair of spacious loafers.

They let him in—
Made a rare exception.
Against protocol,
He loaded his head into a helmet.

They padded his uniform,
Built a fortress underneath.
His body, compact and edgy,
Fitted into a hanging birdcage.

He went up into the sky
Where he became a predator.
They gave him unbridled power,
Yet he controlled his turrets as if they were his hands.

They pad-locked his eyes,
Blue on clear blue.
Sometimes on brown,
On green,
On gray and tired.

When he landed in a heap
Of adrenaline, carnage,
Handshakes, and paperwork
Unpacking seemed to take forever—

He'd stand heavier, on splinters now.
His clothes too tight, wrapped around a soaring heart.
His eyes, captured by clapping hands,
Appear bluer than they'd ever been.

Femme Fatale: Cora

Nikki Dolson

This wife:
wide as the front door
morals like wet paper
her tongue
thick and lascivious
her lips
mashable, bitable
her smell
a heavy musk
like lost dreams, two-penny candy
some other man's wife,
an unasked for gift,
a siren,
a death row curse

Rights

Lauren Loughridge

Who are they? Who are you? Who are we? Who am I?

they are the ones
who control this country
forcing their beliefs on us
telling us no – we'll ruin marriage

you are the hypocrites
eager to forget your faults
casting judgment and stones
claiming to protect tradition

we are two women
wanting what you have
freedom to marry
equal rights

I am the woman
who loves her deeply
desiring more than a partnership
more than a civil union

when she gives me a ring
I want to say "Yes"
let me be her wife
let her be mine

grant us our rights
American rights, civil rights, human rights

give us a wedding
that we shouldn't have to ask for
give us a marriage
that shouldn't be denied

Woman of Hope

Krystie Reed

Woman of virtue why are you blinded?
I feel your shattered heart through those blood stained tears.
Are you lonely because of your choices?
Broken because of his fist?

That man didn't see your worth.
I know he said he loved you but left his anger on your face.
He was blinded to the pearl sitting before him.
But you are still here; God isn't finished with you yet.

Forgive him woman of hope.
Cut off the puppet strings.
Your glow is still present behind the bruises.
I'm telling you God isn't finished with you yet.

Woman of strength why are you still hurting?
Don't you see the beauty in your eyes?
Can't you see life is written all over your face?
That God isn't finished with your race?

Woman of hope why do you cry?
Woman of love why are you angry?
Woman of virtue why are you blinded?
Woman of strength why are you still broken?

You are more than your past.
More than your pain, more than your regret.
Open your eyes to your God.
He isn't finished with you yet.

Assumption: Something Taken for Granted

Patricia Newnhouse

The cemetery is close enough to the road that cars create an almost constant hum. Like a white noise to cover the awkward silence of the dead, you only notice it when you think of how the quiet might drive you mad. You read the sign that the iron gate bears: "Visiting Hours: 8:30am– 5pm." No midnight birthday celebrations or late night anniversary toasts here. Just half past eight to five o'clock, like shiftwork.

It's only ten minutes from your house. Pull out and drive east, take a left at the third light and turn right by the hard-to-see sign at the start of the too narrow drive. The last time you were here was in eighth grade, when you sat in the back of your mom's conversion van and travelled in the procession. All you can remember is that it looked like rain. Maybe it drizzled, but you wouldn't know because you had your headphones in and refused to look out the window. You remember standing on the grass, a dark wood casket in front of you. One of your younger cousins was holding a stuffed dog. Your uncle always used to run around your grandparent's house scooping kids off the wood floor and throwing them into the back bedroom. He was the dogcatcher. You were the dogs.

It's been six and a half years now. And you're going back. Why has it taken you so long? Your mom and grandparents go every year. Maybe it's the day, April fool's day. Some joke, huh?

You take out your phone to read your mom's directions: When you turn in take a left. You steer your wheel, careful to stay off the grass. When you round the corner there is a tree and I think a garbage can. About ten garbage cans spot the edges of the road, and there are at least three times as many trees. "Thanks mom," you think. You try to think like her and spot an old tree with one of the dark green metal cans to its left. Park car. Half of your truck sits on the too small road, the rest on the edge of the too green grass that will soon hug the relatives of future mourners.

They're buried in a section with flat grave markers and a big bronze statue in the center. The figure has its arms open, as if it's saying "Here they are. Somewhere." Now you just have to find them. Start looking at the ground probably ten to fifteen lots from the road. You scurry past the first five lots or so and then look down. You dance between the markers, trying not to step on the six feet of dirt that separates the skeletons from those whose hearts still beat. As you pass each marker you scan the last names. Some are hard to read, others are covered by flowers, one framed by pine cones.

You return to the edge of the road after fifteen minutes of failed searching. Your heart beats a little too fast as you dial your grandma's number.

The ringing makes you nervous. You're brushing your teeth as your mom answers the phone. Running water. Her hushed hurried tone. You throw your toothbrush on the counter and rush down the block to your grandparents' house to watch your little sisters and cousins.

She answers after the third ring and says they're to the left of the statue. And pretty close to it too.

You get back in your car and drive to the other side of the section, Section 12, she said. You were looking on the wrong side of the giant's outstretched arms.

This time you park next to a tree a couple heads taller than yourself. Its limbs twist into each other and a green metal cylinder sits by its side.

You're staring at the statue now. You walk right up to it, careful not to step on the stones, but no longer worried about what lays beneath the dirt. The outline of the newly dug graves proves what you can't avoid. You've come to realize that death lies all around you, and beneath you and in you.

You know as soon as your dad comes back from the hospital. He picks up a rag. Cleans. No one else is with him.

You tilt your head back to look the statue in the eyes. The wind causes your hair to obscure your view. Slices of bronze mix with the fading sky. You shake your head. The statue's mouth is straight, almost emotionless. His legless figure rests on rectangles of marble. He looks almost as forgotten as the bodies he guards.

You decide to pace the rows. Up one. Down another. You pass a marker with two windmills, though only one spins. As you read the names on the small gray bricks, you come along a Mr. Freund. You recognize the word from class, German for friend. You smile. A moment of familiarity in a place that makes you feel so lost.

Your dad pulls you into the basement to help grab some soda for the girls. Your sisters and your uncle's daughters are making get well soon cards. He's not going to make it. But you can't let the little ones know.

You call your grandmother again. Why can't you find them? As soon as she picks up you see it, a half sunken grave with a bouquet of purple fabric flowers. You walk closer, phone still in hand. You glance at the marker. The last name's right. "I found one of them, Grandma. I found Aunt Flo." You hang up and bring yourself to the ground. Your knees dig into the grass-covered dirt. The ground absorbs you. Her grave is less than a year old and you can tell it hasn't settled yet. One purple flower escaped her bouquet, so you stick it back into the Styrofoam.

Your uncle liked yellow roses or at least that's what your mom says. The one from his funeral is still in your room. Pressed in some book.

The wind picks up, enough for you to grab the blades of green that are surrounding your fingers. You start to think that Aunt Flo hasn't settled yet either. It's hard to breath. The same thickness fills the air that suffocated you in your room the night she died. You think back to the wooden shelf, the one that missed your TV and landed halfway across your room, the one that left its nails sticking straight out of your wall. You always wanted to know if she was trying to tell you something. What did you want to tell me, Aunt Flo? Why me? It's not like you knew her that well, just saw her at family parties, maybe a few times a year at most.

Why me? you ask the Lord that day. You wished something would happen so you wouldn't have to take a family picture. But you never thought He would answer you like this. You never thought your uncle would fall in that driveway. That you'd never really know why. Heart Attack. Or maybe a blood clot. Something with his brain?

As the wind dies down, you look at the dates on

her marker. The rest of the words become hard to see as you realize her birthday was just a few days before. The same as your grandmother's. You don't even know why she's hitting you so hard. You aren't even here to see her. You push yourself up, and brush your hands on your jeans. But still, you can't help but wonder.

You don't cry when you bring the little ones their drinks. Just smile. You pick up a crayon and help them with their cards.

Your grandma said the graves were all connected. You get up and scamper back to the row above. You recognize the names, even though you can't match them to a face. A great aunt and uncle you'd never seen and one of your mom's cousins who died too young.

Closer to the road your great-grandparents rest. You pace the rows over and over, past the spinning windmill. Close to Mr. Freund you see part of a marker half covered by grass with a broken bouquet on top. You lift the purple and white fake flowers and see her name. Frantically, you rip the dry brown-green grass from the corners. Buried even deeper is her husband. Your nails trap the dirt that the green monsters grew from. Now that you can read their markers, the pulsing in your wrists slow. You push yourself up with your now-brown hands and search for what you really came for.

Family members parade into your grandparents' house. Your aunt brings her daughters into the living room. And you sit on the steps by the door. The screams of your cousin echo through the house like a song. Your tears dancing to its horrible tune.

You make your way back to Aunt Flo's grave and continue north. Four rows from the statue, you find a marker with yellow cloth flowers and two matching ribbons. From here you can see the tips of the bronze man's fingers. The strong digits point you down. You kneel in front of your uncle's marker. May 29, 1960 – April 1, 2006. He was forty-five. You bow your head as the wind sounds. Husband and Father. You taste the salt on your lips. "And uncle and friend," you think. The man who bought you gummy worms and Happy Meals, who ran around your grandparent's house with all of the kids. The man whose lap you sat on when all of the grown-ups played poker. You were his lucky charm, always kissing his cards for good luck.

You pick up the flowers and grab your pen. You scribble on a ribbon what you wish you could say aloud. Sorry I didn't visit sooner. I miss you. You place them back, covering his name. From your knees you fold into child's pose. You spread your arms and flex your fingertips, hugging the ground where his bones lie limp. As you sit up you realize that no one else is in the section. It's just you and the dirt and the giant bronze statue, though you don't feel alone.

A week later, you pull into the gates of Assumption Cemetery and follow the cracked asphalt to Section 12. You park by the same twisted little tree and follow the statue's fingertips to your uncle's grave. The same yellow flowers still cover his name. But one ribbon is gone.

§

Cold and Wet

Jovanni Torres

No one saw it coming, although we all knew she'd had heart problems since birth. My father and I were the first to notice something was wrong with her when she wasn't acting herself. She had not really eaten the whole day no matter what he tried to make for her. After a few hours of this behavior, my father decided to take her to a hospital.

He asked me if I wanted to come with or stay home. She had been in my family's life for so long, I felt like I had to be there to comfort her. We played in the park together a lot when I was younger and I only really got to see her on the weekends, so I felt like I had an obligation to go.

We got her in the car, strapped her in, and began to make our way to the nearest hospital. Luckily there was no one in the waiting room when we got there so Dr. Murphy was able to see her right away. Dr. Murphy and his aid lifted her up and laid her down.

After examining her with his stethoscope, he looked up at my father and said, "Her heartbeat is very irregular, and seems to be slowing." Upon further examination, he concluded her heart is failing and immediately yelled to the aid for assistance.

"She's going to have to be defibrillated." A large word I did not understand at that time. The aid rushed out of the room and returned with a cart. At this point I had begun to get scared because of the look that was in my father's eyes, a person who understood the situation.

"If there's anyone you'd like to call, now would be the time."

My father seemed incapable of making the call to anyone over his anxiety of the situation. I was only 10 at the time so I did not know why my father was acting this way.

Her eyes had slowly shut all of a sudden and Dr. Murphy yelled, "We have to defibrillate her now! Her heart just stopped." Tears had begun to fill my father's eyes. Everyone seemed to be in a panic. I was more scared at my father's reactions than anyone else's. What is going on?

No matter how many attempts of defibrillation, her eyes did not open. "I'm sorry Mr. Cruz, she's gone," Dr. Murphy said to my father. My father dropped to his knees, leaning over her stomach and cried, "Why God, oh why? Katie please not now, why?"

I crept closer from the corner of the room to her body, which was just lying there. I reached out my hand toward her face. Immediately I too began to cry. I now understood. When my hand had touched her nose, it was no longer cold and wet.

§

Easter Brunch

Alyssa Heeter

Holidays have been a traveling occasion ever since my parents' divorce when I was two. I would have brunch with mom and dinner with dad or vice versa. My grandma, on my mom's side, and my Aunt Jenny, on my dad's side, would try to work our holiday meals around each other's so I could be at both. This had become my tradition. They would do their best to split the hour drive that divided them. I would be chauffeured between my parents' houses by loving uncles, grandparents and my parents' themselves. I would try to find stuff to talk about with whoever was driving me at the time, but often it became forced. I would run out of topics to talk about, questions to ask. Silence made me uncomfortable so I would put on the radio. None of my family enjoyed any phase of my music selection. I rarely enjoyed those car rides.

When I turned 16, I had my license and a car. The drive to see my dad quickly turned from enemy to friend. It became my favorite route. I already knew the series of country roads, every turn was automatic. I could just zone out. The time alone gave me time to think. I could play out the what if's, and the what could have been's, and the what might be's in the serenity of silence. Those drives are the only time I really ever had to myself.

Neither my mother nor I are very good passengers when the other is driving. She always insists I'm driving too fast, although I tell her cops won't stop me for less than 12 over. She has this awful habit of looking in the mirror while she's driving, not at other cars, but herself. She'll put on her makeup or pluck her eyebrows. It makes me a nervous wreck. We try not to take too many car rides together and I rarely let anyone invade my me time to my dad's.

But things were different now. I guess they're always changing. Today, we needed this car ride together. This was the first holiday she had to split with my brother. Enzo's dad picked him up right after we finished breakfast. We wouldn't see him until dinner. We usually spent all day together. Although she was an old pro from doing it with me for years, this divorce was still fresh. I didn't want her spending a moment alone today. I had a speech due the next day and had no time to work on it. I knew that time stuck in the passenger's seat could be used to battle my chronic procrastination and I had a feeling my mom could use a drive on those country roads that silently eased my heart many times.

We did just that. The drive went on in silence. I threw together a speech that I should have had done days ago and my mom sat trapped in a spiral of thought that I would have loved to have heard. Just as I got on a roll and began cranking out my speech, my phone rang.

"Hey, dad."

"Hey, just wanted to let you know I'm about 20 minutes away, where you at?"

"I'm just passing 49, should be there in fifteen or twenty. Oh, and by the way, mom took a ride with me."

"Oh okay," he seemed only slightly caught off guard, "is she eating with us?"

"I'm not sure I told her she's more than welcome to," I said, "but she might go to the mall or something."

"Okay, yeah, let her know she's welcome, I'll see you guys when you get here."

"Okay, see you, love you. Bye." I could hear his smile over the phone.

"Love you too, bye."

I set down my phone and dove back into my laptop. "What did he say?" my mother asked.

"He doesn't care, I told you it's not a big deal. Don't make a big deal of it, just stay and have lunch with us." I barked in a flippant tone that often takes over my tongue when I talk to my mother. I hate when that happens. It has become a habit that I frequently regret. She is always so gentle in her words with me, even when I least deserve it but I snap so quickly at her for no reason. I change my tone and with full sincerity I insist, "It would just be really nice if you would stay and have lunch with us, that's all."

She smiled, knowing that I meant no harm by my tone, I was just caught up in my speech, "We'll see, baby. It would be nice for you guys to have some time together."

"Okay ma, but I'd like you to stay" We drove the rest of the way in silence that was only interrupted with blurts of, "Weren't you supposed to turn there, ma?" and "How's it coming, over there? Want to bounce anything off of me?" Other than a few requests for her help on figuring out where in the hell I was exactly going with this speech, we left each other to our thoughts.

Before I knew it, the hour long drive had flown past. We pulled up at a small Irish pub off of Route 2, called Benny's. My mom parked towards the front, "Do you think your dad will see us here?" she asked.

"Yeah, there's only like five other cars in the lot and you may as well be parked in the street all the way here," the tone again. With a quick change of voice I said, "You're fine, he'll see us." She shut the engine off. We sat, basking in the sun on the first nice day this year.

I wondered how old the building was. The dark, green paint was peeling off the side of the wooden panels that surrounded it. Benny's rugged, run down look reminded me of our Oakwood house. We had just moved out a month before. It happened so quickly that I wasn't sure whether I missed it or not. I knew I didn't miss the way things used to be or the family that we were in that house. I don't know if we were ever really happy there. I wasn't sure about much about that house at the moment other than the fact that Benny's looked run down. It brought to mind the same feeling that house on Oakwood conjured. Worn and out of sorts.

My daze was broken by a tap on my window. I looked up to find beautiful, colorful flowers covering my father's face. I opened door and snatched my flowers before giving him a huge hug and a kiss on the cheek. His stubbly beard pierced my lips. "Happy Easter baby. Thanks for driving out to see me." He handed me a card and although I didn't yet open it, I knew what it would say. My father's cards are always filled with "I'm so proud of the woman you're growing to be," and "I love you with all my heart and forever." It's been the same on all my cards for years but every time it always makes a tear or two puddle at my lash because I know he means it more every time he writes it.

I put my flowers and unopened card in the car and looked at my mom who I noticed was still giving us the time to tell her that we wanted to spend time alone. "Hey dad," I yelled from mom's open passenger door "You don't have any shit to talk about mom she can't hear right?"

My dad laughed, "No I think I got it all out last time"

My mom rolled her eyes, "Lunch it is then." After doing this for 16 years there were no hard feelings, we could joke. Dad and I walked towards the door as my mom collected her purse and touched up her lipstick. My mother never went out without her make up just

right. It used to drive me crazy. I always felt like we were late because she had to be just right. As I've grown up, I've grown to love this about her. My dad opened the door for me and I walked past, "Thank you, sir," I said. "Did I tell you about that movie I saw last weekend?" I turned to see my dad still holding the door, remembering that she's always a little late. His face held no impatience or annoyance that I had seen many times when he has to wait on others. He just waited for my mother, holding that door with a blank stare.

That blank look had occupied his face most of the time for months now, ever since Stacey moved out. I considered Stacey my dad's wife. They lived together for years. They were madly in love. They would leave each other love notes around the house like teenagers but talked like soul mates. She was good for him, good for us. Right before Thanksgiving, she left. She just packed her stuff and left. With no real explanations, she ended the only relationship I ever admired. I don't think my dad will ever fully recover from losing her.

I'm not sure he ever really recovered from my mom, she finally walks through the door, "Thanks, Jeff." my mom hesitantly says as she realized he waited which is something her most recent ex-husband would have never done.

A blond man in his mid-thirties is waiting for us at the host's stand "Three?" we all nod, "right this way." He leads us to a booth in the bar, only fleetingly questioning my age. We all order black coffee and water with lemon, the only two drinks any of us drink. I've always known when out to eat with my mother or father, order two waters and two coffees, but for the first time I started to recognize the small things we all had in common and wonder why these have never occurred to me before.

My dad and I have the same sense of humor. It drives my mom crazy. My mom pours a tube of energy powder into her drink and stabs the mixture into her ice water which proves not to work very well. "Hey mom, how's that coming along? Looks like you're having some problems over there."

I look at my dad, waiting for my partner in crime. "Alyssa, give your mom a break" my dad says and he shoots my mom a smile, "she's simple minded, fortunately you got my brains." Mom raises an eyebrow. The never ending debate of who has stronger genes continued as the server placed Easter brunch on the table.

We picked at our meal. I caught dad up on our life recently, the move and divorce. My mom brags about what great friends I have, how they helped so much during the move. "You just liked 'em cause the boys had the hots for you. They were all asking me what bars mom is gonna be going to, she's got 'em lined up out the door waiting" Dad smiled and mom quickly reminded me "I'm done with men, I have my two perfect children and that's all I need." She said.

"God, you're bitter, mother," I remind her.

"You sound like my mother" my dad warned her.

"I'm not bitter," she defended herself, "I'm just happy on my own."

My dad shook his head, "I dunno, I guess I'm still a hopeless romantic. I still hope I might find the one"

"Of course you can daddy. Things will work out" I tried to fill my voice with reassurance but I've never been so unsure of anything in my life. Watching them both go through heartache, being an adult this time I'm so aware. I feel with them, for them. They were both re-established in something that was supposed to last. This time they each had it right. First time was just practice, we all accepted that. Here we are sixteen years later wondering what went wrong this time. I'm not sure things

were ever right. I sat watching these two people that created me, who once loved each other, and I've watched each love another. Thinking of all the times we had, I realize this is the first holiday I ever remember spending with my parents together. In this run down Irish pub, at eighteen I sat down and celebrated my first holiday with both of my parents. It took a lot of time. We all had to break and heal a few more times. After wondering where we all went wrong how they both ended up alone, I looked at my parents, my family and loved them more than ever.

§

Photo: Kristina McPherson

Fingertips (micro essay

Jackie Darnell

I'd lost seven pounds in three days, and would soon lose three more. My stomach was tense and I couldn't eat. Nothing was more appetizing than the thought of your arms around me. I also clenched my jaw throughout the day, but wouldn't realize it until my teeth shrieked in pain.

In quiet contemplation, my gaze fixed upon us. Nearly five years ago, in the light of the setting sun, the smile on your face while you kissed me was proof that you loved me. I did not set the frame face down like they do in the movies. I stared. Stared and wept.

The turtles seemed to grow in number every year since we claimed them as our animal. The floppy one with ginormous eyes. The hand puppet from Borders. The little one named Franklin that I still keep in my car. Only last week was I able to part with one. Patience was one of my favorites, and apparently he was my nephew's favorite too. Just the other day, when you and I spoke on the phone, I told you I'd given him away. Though your voice did not waver, I imagined you sobbing with disbelief that I could ever part with a piece of you, a piece of us. Maybe that made me feel better.

I looked at the palms of my hands before setting them politely in my lap. You still lived in my fingertips. When I closed my eyes, I could feel my hands on you and your hands on me. Remember when you left your cologne on my pillow? My little sister almost fell in love with you over it. I took that smell with me wherever I went. I'd just be walking or riding my bike when, like a rush of ecstasy, my brain would send a signal to my nose--a mixture of Carolina Herrera's 212 and sweat. I knew it was you, and I called it your hot smell.

I didn't know you liked 'em thick. How could I compete with someone when beauty obviously didn't matter? Still, I'm glad you showed me a picture of you and your wife. It's as if I've removed the black hood from my heart's executioner and stared her right in the face. I tossed the photo on the dash of my car for you to retrieve, but not before I'd burned it into my memory, searing the place where I'd kept all the promises you made.

A couple weeks ago, I came across the mixed CD that you gave to me years before. Funny how the song I used to skip over was suddenly my favorite one. I must have enjoyed the penetrating feeling of being stabbed in the heart so much that I put the track on repeat. Your love is better than ice cream, better than anything else that I've tried.

§

Free Will

Zachary Tincher

October 2011

"Engineering is where the money is, kid! The rail road will always be here. You are a cracker jack and I know you can be somebody someday. You see, I worked all my life. Broke MY back to make money just to pay the bills to support you guys. YOU have the chance to be something better than I, some broke-dick dog renting a house on the wrong side of 165th, will ever be."

"Da-"

"I can get you an internship at TTX. Just keep taking them engineering classes and type me up a resume. It's time to get your foot in the door, son. You can work in the tower. You can design the rail cars of the future. You won't have to bust your ass fixing train wheels like I do. You'll be a boss. It's all up to you. I mean, do what you want, unless you want to work at Subway the rest of your life."

It's lecture time again. The same clichéd rant about my future in the railroad industry, some sort of predetermined choice my father mapped out for me around the same time he named me Zachary Lovelace when I was just a few hours old. It always lasts approximately 10 minutes, transforming from "You need to get me a resume, kid" and "The dog shit needs to be picked up in the backyard" to "Manning's never gonna play with Indianapolis again, the pussy" in a vast spectrum of Dad's prerogatives.

Dad's subliminal train messages have been around my whole life. My first toy set included a few characters from "Thomas the Tank Engine" television show. Illuminating my early childhood bedroom was Thomas again, smiling down at me with friendly invitation. On December 25th for a few years in my youth, a Lionel track circled around the Christmas tree with a GATX (the company my father worked for at the time) tanker racing along the miniature track enthusiastically. I never remember the details: the probable youth in Mom's eyes, or how my dad most likely lacked his current beer gut with protruding belly button, or what the tree or even the house looked like. But the GATX tanker is always there, zipping around the blurred Christmas tree, a reminder of some sort of destiny.

* * *

Late August 2010

The stenches of old man and possibly sour milk permeate the Anderson 220 computer lab at Purdue Calumet. Zombie shuffling, my Intro to Engineering professor walks into class. In the vast lanes of 21st century computer desks sit 30 students, most of which (like myself), are eager freshmen newly-born into college life. Brick walls are left blank, seemingly a prison cell with computers and a CAD drawing of Wall-E framed on the north-facing wall behind me.

"Uhh," the professor begins, "today, uhh, we'll be talking about your BINGO sheets for MET, IET, CGT, and CET." He smiles, hunched over, unable to find the strength to vanquish gravity. "Welcome to, uhh, the beginning of your bright futures as engineers and technicians." He smiles again, not really looking at each student's faces, but instead at some point beyond them.

"Blah, blah," the lecture drags on. "I have worked in, uhh, the field as an Industrial Engineer for forty years." Again, smiling. "I am an accredited member of the IEEE, uhh, IIE, ASE, ASME…" He seems to smile at the end of each and every sentence.

The lecture continues.

"Job outlook for engineers and technicians will, uhh, always be good." Smiles. "People, uhh, will always be needed to fix, uhh, machinery and design, uhh, the machinery of the future."

After a half hour of three-letter acronyms and engineering statistics, my head comfortably rests on my hand, with eyes still on the professor.

"You students are very lucky to be interested in this, uhh, high demand field. Of course there will be some job competition, but, uhh, if you network with the right people, you will, uhh, have a stable career, unlike those English majors across the campus." He smiles again.

Thus begins my adventure in Mechanical Engineering Technology.

* * *

July 2010

"Yeah, so I decided that I'm going to be an English teacher, just like the Melbs!" Robert explains through tiny speakers on my cell phone.

Crickets sing during night's waking hours while I sit on our back porch swing, butt numb from the metallic chillness emanating from underneath the swing's cushion. The aging porch light attached to the house shines bright, casting a blue-white glow on the inflatable pool, the garage, and me.

"That's great, Shippo! I didn't know you liked English that much."

"Why don't you major in it? I know you're a good writer. I've read your stuff before. I mean, Melby and Mow Chow loved you in high school."

"I don't really know, bud. I love writing. I love expressing myself with pen or keyboard. But where are the jobs at? I need some career that'll support my future family and me."

"You can be a teacher like me! And then freelance for newspapers or stuff on the side. Maybe, just maybe, you can incorporate that Nanowrimo thing you do into the curriculum."

"I can barely talk to people in general, let alone stand up in front of a class and speak for over an hour. Didn't you see me spasm out when I gave my Salutatorian address at graduation a few months ago? I was scared shitless."

"Well, it might not be so scary if you're talking about a passion of yours. Sure, I hate public speaking as well, but I know I'll be teaching something I love!"

The GATX tanker races around the Christmas tree.

"I think the engineering thing will be okay for me. I mean, I sorta liked it in high school in those Project Lead the Way classes. And I got A's in them and I'm beast at math. It'll be an easy way to make money."

"As long as you think you'll be happy with it..."

I pause. Silence trickles along the backyard as the crickets halt their tune. A slight wind rustles nearby trees. They're whispering, the trees. Talking to each other about their disappointment in me.

"...But I gotta go to bed, bro. Tomorrow I start packing for Ball State!"

"Good night, Robert."

* * *

April 2011

"Baby, I love you. I want to share my life with you from now on. I want to love, honor, and protect you until I draw my last breath. With you by my side, I want to raise a family. Beautiful kids with your looks and my brains. We can do this. I'll stick with my engineering classes to support us. I can intern at my dad's company this summer and make two grand a paycheck. We'll

live in a nice house with nice cars somewhere in the promised land of California. Will you marry me?"

After relishing in the dream she always wanted. "Yes, babe. I love you."

The chilled wind licks at our faces on the rickety pier overcasting the lake on a sun-graced Spring afternoon. Boaters across the lake wave and cheer while the sun tries to break through the clouds. All the while the tanker makes another revolution around the tracks.

* * *

May 2011

English 405 Portfolio Letter Excerpt:

When I registered for the class, I hoped it would teach me to appreciate my writing and enhance my style. However, I found that I was just being exposed to writing I have already been taught in my high school's creative writing and AP English exercises. Although the activities and assignments were fun, I always felt my writing lacked something. To this day I still do not know what that something is.

My outlook on writing and reading creative works has changed as well. For a long time, I dreamed of publishing my past works for the world to see. However, as my style of writing has changed, I often wonder if people will care to read how I analyze my soul or the world.

* * *

June 14th, 2011

Facebook post at 4:46pm (CST):

"Yeah, so I totally love how the 'rents totally bash my decision to do something in my life that will make me happy."

My old professor smiles and "uhs" while conducting the GATX train around the blurred-out Christmas tree.

The trees in my backyard whisper in excitement, but are told to "shut up" by Mom and Dad.

* * *

June 2011

"Oh yeah, you wanna know what really happened to that cheap little ring of yours? I threw it in the fucking lake."

* * *

June 2011

"Hey Mom, can I talk to you about something?"

"Sure, hun. What's up?"

Sweat beads off our faces thanks to another 90 degree day. We sit on that old, deep forest threaded couch in the living room as she watches the latest episode of "All My Children."

"I've been thinking about this for a while now, so hear me out. Promise me you won't rant or cut me off or anything."

"Okay…"

"I don't like engineering. It's not fun. Learning about metallic alloys and doing trig to determine the equilateral forces on an object being hydroformed in an industrial plant bores me. It doesn't hold the same appeal it did when I was 15 making toy trains on a computer. Sure it makes good money, but that's not what I wan-"

"I think you're making a big mistake. Jobs aren't supposed to be fun," she begins. Oh god, another rant. "Do you think I like my job? Do you think your father loves his job?"

Our Chihuahua wakens from his sleep next to us on the couch. Ears erect, he knows troubles afoot.

"But mo-"

"You are so smart, Zachary. God's given you an amazing gift and I am blessed with a son like you. No one else in our family has made it, and for you to get a free ride into college, I feel I did a great job as a parent.

Now, what were you thinking of majoring in?"

"Writing. You know I love it and am good at it-"

"Where are the jobs in writing? Who makes good money writing? Tell me? You've been given a free ride and you're going to piss it away for a writing degree!?"

The Chihuahua leaps from the couch and scurries into his cage, tail hidden by his hind legs.

"Look," I begin, trying to stay as calm as possible, yet knowing my talk is useless even with a superior sense of rationale than her. "I've been given the opportunity to not have a job, but a career. That's something entirely different than some Walmart stocker or cashier. Mom, I can double up with a Comm major and get into adver-"

"I can tell you this, engineering will make you money. You will be able to support your kids and wife and not live like we have to, paycheck to paycheck. Why haven't you typed your dad a resume? He can get your foot in the door at TTX. You can start your life on good terms. Don't waste your time with writing. You'll amount to nothing. This conversation's over."

* * *

October 24th, 2011

I tap the "play" icon displayed on my iPod and let the music resound through my ears. It's an old playlist of the progressive rock band Rush. I haven't listened to them for a while and as the vocalist sings the lyrics to the song "Freewill," I stare blankly at my bedroom wall.

"You can choose a ready guide in some celestial voice. If you choose not to decide you still have made a choice. You can choose from phantom fears and kindness that can kill. I will choose a path that's clear. I will choose free will."

What am I doing to myself? I have listened to others for so long instead of myself? It's time for a change. It's time to be happy.

* * *

November 2011

Spring 2012 Course Schedule:

Mondays and Wednesdays:

-Short Fiction Writing

-English Composition II

-Introduction to Philosophy

Tuesdays and Thursdays:

-Spanish Level II

-Nature of Literature Study

The GATX train derails and lies lifeless against the track. Trees shout in awe and shed their leaves in celebration and approval. Life starts now.

§

Hamburgers

Melissa Pillipow

From a time before we understand what a Circadian rhythm is, we sleep at night and function during the day. It is, for the most part, the expected way of living. It is also the case that nature operates in a highly intricate, self-regulating order, that is, until someone or something disturbs it. Clasp your fingers around the chilled lock of a public restroom stall and rub your eyes; there may not be enough tissues and Robitussin in the western hemisphere to satiate your cough and runny nose needs in two days time. Glance left in a moment when you should be looking right, and in a split second, you may find yourself nuzzling with a deployed airbag. Any system, no matter the size, goes awry at the presence of a chink – deliberate or accidental.

It is this very principle I hold responsible for creating and exposing the eccentric characters I became acquainted with while waiting tables during the midnight shift. Though the posses engaging in drunken revelries, so common during the hours of 10 P.M. to 6 A.M., fit snugly into this category, such crowds have the influence of alcohol to blame. Late night travelers and inebriated comrades aside, customers ambling in after midnight through two generally possessed a certain air of peculiarity.

Rocco, habitually seated at either end of the counter at least five days out of the week, was one of these distinctive characters. Sitting atop his head was a dark, tightly curled tuft of hair that looked as if it would spring back into place regardless of what you did to it. His face had a certain simplicity that couldn't hide emotion. Though at first, Rocco's nasal-sounding voice seemed awkward, and even humorous at times, it seemed to fit his rather bulbous nose.

Rocco was an animated character, not only in his physical attributes, but also his disposition. When he had enough dealing with management and coworkers at his pizzeria, dishwashing job, his heavy feet bludgeoned the ground. The floor was an effigy of those he was frustrated with that day, at that particular time. Nevertheless, his irritations were easily palpable, without hearing a speck of a story about the "corruption of today's young generations," (a phrase he had probably been working to make grammatically correct all day). Just the same, when he quit that job, he strolled in with his shoulders back, donning a bright pink wife beater and forest green, nylon, swishy shorts.

"Life's what it is, Kiddo. Something goes wrong, and you gotta just say, 'hamburgers,'" Rocco shared, eagerly shifting in the swiveling barstool, settling in for the next three to six hours. At nearly every one of his own comments, Rocco would giggle, slap his knee, catch his second wind, shrug, and end the entire show with the phrase "hamburgers."

Though Rocco was in his sixties, I never would have known if he hadn't told me. While it was fairly easy to understand, his speech was limited in scope; his written repertoire was even narrower. Much of what he said was cliché, repeated over and over again, or incorrect usage of a word or phrase he heard and wanted to adapt to his own vocabulary. However, that's not to say that Rocco was lazy or unintelligent. In fact, I believe he diligently attempted to better himself (perhaps trying harder than most people I've ever met). Despite his best efforts, there was something peculiar about Rocco. Maybe it was of his character that he was the way he was. But, then again, maybe it was in his blood.

A part of me believes that Rocco was never aware of the odd sensation others saw him as. Even as a grown man, he retained quite of bit of his childlike egocentrism. It was difficult, if even possible, to give a little input here or there. Forget choosing a topic or steering the conversation in that direction. I'm not certain that Rocco knew even five things about me from the hours of conversation we held for the months I served on midnights. But, I knew that he badly wanted the starring role in a nearby theatre company's production of "Evita." For months, he took voice lessons from a woman whom he received adulation and praise from, and whom he admired greatly. And, of course, it was in Rocco's nature to be oblivious to the presence of others in the restaurant when he would, at full volume, sing tunes from "Les Miserables" at the counter, dramatic opera hand gestures included.

I also knew that he faithfully followed the Catholic teachings. He even tried to consecrate himself to the Virgin Mary, an extremely difficult test of self-discipline rooted in the religious foundations of Catholicism. But, after divulging some of his more guilty pleasures, decided he was neither fit, nor worthy of the title, and after that, ceased to bring it up again. In contrast, Rocco inquired several times about where I go to church, and still probably doesn't know my religious affiliation. Like I said, Rocco was a one way street on most occasions.

His childish ways branched off from more than his speech patterns or topic of conversation. On more than one occasion, when something wouldn't go his way, Rocco would lose his cool. After he found out that he had not been cast for his desired role in "Evita," but as a member of the chorus, he had much to say in regards to the unfairness of the auditioning process.

"They brought in people they knew to audition for certain parts, and they got 'em. These are open auditions to the public, and if they come in with a guaranteed spot, how is that fair?" He stood up, leaning against the front counter. Attempting to hide his disappointment in not getting the role he wanted, yet clearly irritated, he spoke quickly, nearly stumbling from the end of one word to the beginning of the next. "And, they're getting paid too. I've never heard of a community theater company paying their actors!"

My manager, who was most often caught in the cross-fire of Rocco's rantings, replied, "Oh, Rocco. I suppose it's not fair that they already had players in mind for certain roles, especially since they advertised for open audition. But, since they've made the decision to give some kind of reimbursement for their main leads, the theatre company likely wants to operate in more of a real world fashion."

"The guy just looked at me, and I asked what he was auditioning for. He said he was cast as Peron," Rocco related, desperately trying to regain his poise and dignity, though failing to provide an appropriate response to the previous comment. He slammed his fist onto the marble countertop and threw his hands up in defeat "I said, 'That's what I was auditioning for. I guess that's life. Hamburgers!'"

"I would take it as a start. Use this small role to show them what you have and how reliable you are, and maybe they'll take that into consideration for future productions," my manager explained, realizing that Rocco wasn't going to settle for logic, and instead veered towards encouragement.

"It's just ridiculous! The whole thing!"

On more than occasion, he showed me pictures from the '70's and '80's, when he was young and clickin' his dance shoes on the floors, picking up girls and "doin' his thang." Tight jeans, plaid shirt, and a healthy five-

inch afro, Rocco was the "in" kind of guy. And though he had been with a few women on several occasions, he was in his sixties and (for as much as I knew), alone. I never leveled with Rocco more than on the day he came in the restaurant, somber, donned in his fanciest duds. His brother passed days earlier, and he had just left the funeral home after the wake.

Never seeing Rocco in such attire, my fellow co-workers, along with myself, lightheartedly commented at how extravagant he looked that particular evening. Unaware of the situation, we joked around, asking if he was going out on the town later on. But, when he told us where he had just come from, I realized we were wrong for joking and wrong about Rocco. Like I said before, I don't know that he realized his oddities, but we retracted his humanity for his useless, eternal childishness. We exchanged his incongruous speech patterns for a lack of intelligence. Whenever he came in, he always managed to shanghai nearly every waitress on the floor into talking to him for ten minutes at a time, or until we had something to do (or claimed that we did). We overlooked his desire to talk to and be talked to as egocentrism, instead of a byproduct of loneliness.

Every now and then he'd talk about women – one woman in particular. Carla, a clerk at his bank, was younger than Rocco, and the only woman he ever named. If I were to meet Carla, I would expect, from his descriptions, that she would be a quiet, soft-spoken woman, well-proportioned in all the areas a man finds attractive. Virtue, kindness, affability, and warmth would follow suit. And finally, she would harbor a small spark of ardor towards our Rocco, who would always struggle to discern its true meaning. Figuring that she really enjoyed his company and liked him more than a client and friend, he tried, with no luck, to gain her companionship from the other side of the counter. Always upset by his failed endeavors, he blamed Carla's inability to realize her feelings for him. Never did he think it a possibility that the spark between them was simply her obligatory kindness towards her customers, or even more sadly so, a sprinkle of pity on this lonely man.

See, Rocco, no doubt, was strange. He danced for a seldom few of us on the midnight crew; he did boogies and jigs straight from the 70's, uninhibited and free. He looked absolutely ridiculous, swiveling on his heels and moving his feet outwards, then inwards, outwards, then inwards, and outwards again. His knees bent to a faster rhythm, as did his hips, and finally, his hands did a jive over and under each other. Every time, he reminded me of the droopy-headed character that danced left and right, in place, during the play rehearsal in "A Charlie Brown Christmas."

Rocco, sadly, was mistaken by our shift's crew. We mistook him as nothing more than a cartoon character, drawn to form and never to age with time, except for in the physical sense. But, Rocco, a man who put himself out into the world believing in the best of himself, was a greater man who achieved less than half of us who will be lesser individuals and still attain more – far more. He quit his job, to live off less in exchange for experiencing more. Though closer to decent than great, Rocco's speech was sufficient for his needs, and thereby, did not inhibit his happiness and bliss. Boisterously, he sang and danced, because he believed (even if it was unjustly so) that his talents were of a gold standard quality. Quite easily the most misunderstood thing Rocco did was share. Even though Rocco was always kind when telling his stories, they were usually lengthy, and consequently repelled his possible audience. But, he imparted his life to us – one of the greatest compliments anyone could be

a recipient of.

A trio of roses and a box of chocolate turtles from Rocco for my birthday delivered me to understanding a little bit more about him. In learning more about others, especially people like Rocco, help us to understand more about ourselves and more about life.

From a time before we understand what a Circadian rhythm is, we sleep at night and function during the day. It is, for the most part, the expected way of living. It is also the case that nature operates in a highly intricate, self-regulating order, that is, until someone or something disturbs it. Perhaps, this principle explains some of the characters I met during those nights. Rocco, so exhausted from his day's pursuit and collapsed on his living room rug, however, is not one of them.

§

Photo: Lynette Bankhead

Midnight

Brandi Leep

"A watched phone never rings, you know."

"I know, mommy."

"Why don't you go play with the new bracelet kit grandma got you?"

"I'll play with it tomorrow."

"Sweetie there's only a few hours left of your birthday. I don't want you spending it sitting here waiting."

"Just a few more minutes. Please?"

The girl looked up with pleading eyes. It was dark out now. Her mother knelt down, gently turning her daughter's face away from the tiny green screen with a soft hand.

"I'm sorry sweetie, but I don't think he's going to call."

"He has to call. He always calls."

The girl thought for a moment. Her daddy used to pick her up once a month and they would spend time together. On her birthday they would do something special, like go to the movies. He stopped picking her up after her fifth birthday, when he introduced her to Amy. But he always called. Over the years he called less and less, but every birthday since then, he called.

"Hi baby, sorry I couldn't see you this year. I've been really busy. But I promise I'll see you soon."

And she believed him, every year, with her entire heart.

She turned eight today. It had been seven months and twelve days since his last call. Since his name flashed on the caller ID and she ran to the phone, yelling in excitement.

"Hi, Daddy!"

"Hi, baby."

"Daddy, I miss you so much, are you gonna–"

"Would you mind putting your mother on the phone?"

"Oh. Sure."

She could hear Mommy yelling a lot, but that didn't upset her, that was normal. She was upset when Mommy hung up the phone without letting her say goodbye.

She stared at the silent phone, tears welling every few minutes, as the clock ticked closer and closer to bedtime.

"Come on, Pumpkin," Mommy said, soothingly, "Time for PJs."

"Please, please just five more minutes."

"Bedtime is bedtime." She sighed. "If he calls I'll wake you up, ok?"

The girl nodded, not asking why he hadn't called. She was afraid of the answer. Her mother's face held an expression not unlike her own.

From her bed she listened until the number twelve blinked from her nightstand. The phone never rang.

§

Momma

Jennifer Metyko

Jennifer Looking back on it all, it's hard not to continue repeating the same two phrases over and over again: How did I get here? And what can I do to stay?

This document is written to be so many useful pieces of work. First and foremost, it is written to be my writing. My writing is my vent and my therapy when I am lost, alone, confused, and out of options on my emotional roller coaster in this world. Second, it is a written assignment for the best English class I have ever taken in my life… an assignment worth a certain number of points and for a grade that I don't even care about, simply because of what the third meaning this document holds to my heart. Third, this document is a letter, in the form of a story, pieced together by the words of my heart, to the person who helped turn my world inside out and upside down in the best and most unbelievable way possible.

Walking into the Ortt household, the remorse that had taken me over was simply overwhelming. Eight women… I counted them in my head over and over again. After five years, I don't understand how someone could be so incredibly unfaithful. I could feel the blood still pulsing beneath the palm of my hand from where it made contact with his face… twice. I wondered if his face was pulsing the same way. My purse hit the table with anger and my phone went off in an obnoxious text tone again. Maybe it's him! I wondered instantly when that thought would stop. I didn't want to hear from him. I didn't want to hear his voice ever again, and this was a strange feeling for me.

Amanda came up behind me and put her arm around me in a teary hug. The world doesn't know much about me, but there is one thing everyone knows about me for sure: I have the perfect best friend. I met Amanda my freshman year of high school, but I know her better than everyone in my family combined. I tell my fiancé consistently that, while he is the love of my life, she is my soulmate. I am not sure there is anyone else in the world who could understand the rhythm of my everyday life and crazy mood swings quite like she does.

"I have to shower. You ok?" I nodded. No, I wasn't okay at all. How okay could I possibly be when the world as I had known it just ended? Somehow, I knew I would find a way through this unbearable pain. As her feet padded out of the room, I heard Robyn (a.k.a., Momma) lean against the counter behind me.

When I turned around and met her sharp blue eyes, her gaze seemed incredibly soft to me. The entire time I have known her, Momma has always been a "tough love" kind of girl. On this night, though, I could see that something had changed in the way she might approach this situation.

"You know, do you really think he is your forever?" Anyone else asking me this question would leave me feeling incredibly stupid, but her voice was dripping with care for me. Of course I knew he wasn't my forever, but I loved him. How could anyone else understand? I don't know what made me think of it, but I remembered hearing the stories of Jeff, Amanda's father. Amazing man, amazing father, amazing high school sweetheart… awful husband.

It hit me, then and there. She could understand. Momma knew exactly what I had been through, because she had been through it too. Hers was simply official. I felt my eyes well with tears at the thought of

this realization, at the thought of someone understanding my broken heart.

"Of course he's not my forever." My voice cracked under the pressure of my broken heart. I instantly couldn't see through my tears anymore. As I closed my eyes, all I could feel was her warm embrace around my shoulders, holding me from falling to the ground. All I could see was how happy she had turned out with Joe, the obvious love of her life, and how what I had wasn't anywhere near what they shared, what I deserved…

Two months later, I found myself standing in that very kitchen, wrapped in the same woman's arms, filled with disbelief at the text message before me. How could someone as amazing as my best guyfriend actually want to be with someone as clumsy and goofy as me? Doesn't he know who I am? But there the text was, admitting his feelings for me after four years. I could feel myself swell with excitement and happiness at the thought of visiting him in New York. She read my mind.

"If you move to New York, I will hold you while Mandy punches." Oh, Momma. I looked at her and beamed, well aware of the fact that I would not have had the nerve to break away from my past if it hadn't been for her arms that kept me from crumbling at her feet two months earlier…

A whole year later, and I am back at the beginning, literally. How did I get here, and what can I do to stay? I'm getting married next summer, and I will have my degree next fall. I have a plan for life that could conquer the world with style and grace, and I have never been quite so proud of myself for chasing every dream. I am packing to go jet skiing on the same Lake Michigan with the same best friend that I have shared every memory with for the same last seven years, Katy Perry's "Waking Up In Vegas" blaring on my laptop in the background, when I get a phone call filled with just about every amount of unfairness and heartbreak left in the world.

Ten minutes later, I found myself standing in that very kitchen, wrapped in the same woman's arms, filled with disbelief at the information before me. "Acute myelocytic leukemia." I don't even know what that is, but it just ended my world. I feel Momma start to shake in my arms as the tears come pouring down her cheeks. I am well aware of the fact that it is my turn to keep her from crumbling, because I know she is too strong for that.

We break apart, my keys awkwardly fumbling in my hand. All I know is I am ready to load up my own car with gas to take her anywhere in the world to make her better… but I know that won't be necessary. I put my arm around my Manda, unsure of who is holding who tighter as Momma gets in the car with Joe, the obvious love of her life. She will be gone for four weeks at least, but those four weeks will fly by… I'm sure.

"Take care of my Mandy while I'm away. I'll be gone for a long time."

I can't believe I didn't cry in her presence that afternoon… something in me told me that it was her turn to cry, my turn to reassure, because everything would be okay.

"Of course, Momma." I meant it when I smiled back at her. It's my turn to be strong.

Amanda and I walked back into the house as we heard the car pull away, still filled with disbelief of the speed at which she was torn from our lives. Just yesterday she had a bone marrow biopsy done, certain the results would be just fine.

We packed up and went to visit Amanda's sister.

I know that these people aren't my true family, but they truly are my family. While I expected to find an evening filled with tears and remorse, I found a night filled with laughter and fun, just as Momma would have wanted it. As my stomach began to hurt from the laughter all evening, I felt a soft sense of security in the world. Everything is going to be okay.

My Momma currently resides at the RUSH University Medical Center in Chicago. July 3rd, she was taken from our lives for what I could only describe to her as "God's version of a forced vacation." In all honesty, she is the reason that I am getting married next summer to someone who makes me happier than I ever could have possibly imagined, and I smile every time I write her name on my guest list. If there is anything I can say about my Momma, Robyn, it is this: Strong is an understatement. She is the female version of God himself if such a thing does exist. She is someone who takes pride in the two daughters of her own and the many daughters of others for the beauty, grace, and intelligence that she has helped bring into the world. She is someone who has undoubtedly left a handprint on my heart, and she is someone who I have never been afraid to send a facebook message once in a while to remind her so. She is someone who is incredibly proud of any work she accomplishes, and likes to see the result of her job well done. Her job well done lead to my happily ever after, and words cannot describe just how much I look forward to seeing her there to witness the result of that job well done next summer.

§

Remembering Dad in Seven Scenes

Scott Thompson

1.

It's winter. Or, at least, it's wintery. I'm wearing my pajamas, just out of bed. I'm also wearing jeans and a sweater with a green Christmas tree on it. It's Saturday morning. It's Christmas morning. It's any day of any week and I am 5 years old. The constant is the house. Well, not so much a house. In reality, it's one of three apartments that make up the small building on May Street. The building is constructed of graying brick, and a collective stoop stretches across the front of it giving way to three equally spaced doors. The door on the farthest right is ours.

I'm lying on my stomach across the hardwood floor of the kitchen. He is sitting on a chair pulled out and away from the table. Between is a slot car track, each of its wired controllers in our possession. It isn't one of the expensive tracks with jumps and falling boulders and hazardous pits and sound effects. This track is a simple figure-8, and the mild humming of the electrical current is the only sound as the cars make their way around it.

He has a human form, but no face. A flat blank pallet sits atop his shoulders, which continue to grow outward and broad before shrinking inward and twisted. As I stare at the empty canvas, a wild assortment of hair shoots out of the top of it, rapidly shifting colors and styles. Kind eyes appear, then tired, then concerned, then distracted. A nose begins to protrude, growing long and short in rhythm, like the playing of an accordion. The mouth finally manifests, and it never fluctuates. A straight line cut across his warping face, displaying no discernible amount of pleasure or dismay.

We race our cars for as long as I choose to remember.

I'm fifteen. My mom has asked my younger brother and me out of our separate bedrooms and into the kitchen. As a rule, the three of us generally talk in passing and in short bursts. This may be our first town hall assembly. A State of the Thompson Family address. We join her at the round, wooden table tucked neatly into the small dining room of our house on 44th Street. The two dogs, one small, rotund and white and the other, large, black, and timid, circle the table, assuming we are using it for its intended purpose.

We sit cautiously, and wait for her to begin.

"I just wanted to let you guys know," she starts slowly, our uncertainty clearly hereditary, "that I've been talking to your dad. He said he'd like to come visit you sometime, if you wanted him to. Would you want him to do that?"

I search inward to all the empty places in my mind that that word – dad – is supposed to fill. I find nothing substantial: ambivalence, a small bubbling pond of disdain, a mild electrical hum, a fragmented family portrait. No reservoir of yearning can be found, no thimble's worth of wonder. Not even a droplet of desire stains the white carpet.

As I await some kind of response from the deepest recesses of my mind, my brother speaks up.

"I want to meet him." My brother is twelve years old. Ten years later, he would say the same thing again. I would feel nothing once more.

I again look inward. That's one vote for yes. As I pull and look behind bits of gray, I find something, a small red ember, clinging to life. As I observe it, it begins to swell. The flames burn ferociously, heat impressing

upon me. Then they speak to me. "Think of all the birthdays, all the Christmases, all the good report cards he's missed. Think of what he owes you." The s sound takes shape, serpentine and hissing.

"I guess I'd be fine with it."

3

I'm sitting in the back seat of the two door Toyota Tercel, years before that conversation. My brother is next to me, both of our mouths numb with Novocaine. As is custom during this time, I've escaped the dentist's excavation with no scheduling of a second appointment necessary. The same can't be said for my brother, whose teeth are never free from the oppressive might of the cavity.

"Eric, you have to start brushing your teeth more. I can't afford to keep paying for all these fillings. It's too much."

"But doesn't dad pay for that kind of stuff for us?" I ask.

"He's supposed to pay for your medical and dental bills," she replies, curtly.

"He doesn't do it?"

"No."

"Can't he get arrested for that or something?" my brother inquires, both of us still young enough to believe in the absolute moral right and the punishable moral wrong.

"I've taken him to court twice to get him to pay for your bills, but he never does it. It's too expensive to keep taking him to court just for him to not do it again."

After leaving the dentist's office, Mom stops at McDonald's without us even asking. Once home, we devour our meals and race into our shared bedroom to watch wrestling. Mom sits alone in the living room watching TV until her eyes grow weary. She retires to her bedroom.

4

It's the first week of June and the last week of third grade. Teachers, smart as they are, recognize the class' collective longing gaze out towards the playground and lessen the workload during the waning moments of the school year. On this day, the craft supplies have been pulled out and spilled across the five tables in the classroom. Old, crusty bottles of Elmer's glue stand statuesque in the centers of tables while weathered crayons, most missing their paper encasing entirely, and worn colored pencils take residence in small baskets.

Piles of pristine construction paper are found at each table, a cavalcade of blues, oranges, reds, and yellows. Glitter is available, but not without the teacher's guidance, as it always ends up littered across the floor when trusted to our little hands. A request from the janitorial staff, no doubt.

"Today, kids," starts Mrs. Jennings, "we are going to be making Father's Day cards. It's not for a few weeks though, so you'll have to ask your mothers to hide it until the right time. Feel free to use all the items in front of you to make the best card you can. I'll be walking around and observing, so raise your hands if you have any questions."

As my classmates eagerly begin work on their cards, I stare blankly at the red construction paper in front of me. I don't know what to do. I sit there, hoping to go unnoticed. I hear a faint, mechanical hum and turn to look as a boy uses the electric pencil sharpner on the teacher's desk. It isn't long before Mrs. Jennings notices me and waddles over.

"Why haven't you started, Scott?"

"I don't have a dad."

"Everyone has a dad," she so forthrightly announc-

es before taking a moment and suggesting "Why don't you make one for your grandpa?"

I agree and begin work on the card for my grandpa. For no particular reason, I make a turkey on it by drawing the outline of my hand.

5

It's a Saturday night in August, and I am eleven years old. My mom is babysitting my two younger cousins while my uncle and aunt have something called "date night." It is late, and my cousins, along with my brother, are already asleep. I'm playing my Game Boy while mom watches TV. I'm not paying much mind to it, but it sounds like something important has happened. In brief moments of reprieve, I'll glance up towards the screen, my mom entranced by it, to see reporters and news anchors talking about someone dying. Something about a princess and paparazzi.

Mom continues to watch as I continue to play, both of us whittling deep into the nighttime hours. It's after midnight when, finally, there is a knock at the front door. My uncle Gerald has returned to pick up his slumbering children. They begrudgingly awake and stumble out into the cool air, ready to resume their sleeping as soon as they buckle in to the backseat.

As Gerald walks in, he says hi to me, his breath sour, and stares at the TV.

"Have they announced if she's dead yet?"

"No, not for sure. But everyone seems to think she is."

"Well, that's what she gets. She should have never gotten divorced."

Noticeable even to me, that sentence hangs heavily in the air, acrid and spiteful. It is gaseous, filling our living room in place of oxygen. Silence seems to hold as my mom looks at her brother, completely exposed. I pause my game and look in their direction, stifled.

"Well, you know what I mean," he offers. "Thanks again for watching them. I'll see you later."

My mom shuts the door and pauses there for a moment. The briefest of moments, a rare moment in which she appears vulnerable to me. Uncertain. It passes in an instant, and she reaches for the remote and turns off the TV.

"Time for bed, Scott."

6

My cell phone buzzes. I'm 25 and living in the house that I own. The buzz signals a text message, and I look down to see that it is from my brother. It reads:

I found dad on Facebook. It doesn't look like he's updated his page in a while, but he has us listed under his family category. I guess he lives in Maryland now. I sent him a message and he sent one back to me. I could copy it and email it to you if you want. Do you want me to?

Again, that empty feeling returns. Just as was the case ten years ago, thinking about him returns no identifiable emotion, no extreme one way or the other. This man is a stranger to me. You may as well pull a name from the phone book and ask me if I'd like to call it and invite it to dinner.

Still, curiosity can't be denied, so I text him back "sure." I load Gmail and wait for the email to manifest. Within minutes, it appears. I watch it sitting innocuously for a while, the subject and sender bold and highlighted signifying that it is unread. But should it stay unread? Once read, the words can never be unread again.

I open the email and read the following:

Hey Eric, this is Wayne. How you doing? Not really sure what to say, for obvious reasons, lol. Sorry you got my nose and not ur mom's, her's was always cuter. From

the pic's I saw of you on ur page I can see you have grown into a handsome young man. So tell me, what are ur plans for the future?... career, starting a family of ur own, etc. I would really do want to get to know you and scott as well, but was scared to, thank you ! I always had you guys n my heart an on my mind. I live in Stoney Beach,MD,with my wife Kristie and her son chase, chase is 8yrs old. My number is [REDACTED] if you ever just want to talk, DO MISS MY SONS !! AND HAS ALWAYS WISHED THE BEST FOR YOU BOTH!

7

My cell phone buzzes. I'm still 25. This time it's a call from my mom.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Scott. Whatcha doin'?" She asks flippantly.

"Not much, just about to cut the grass. What's up?"

"Well, do you remember how your dad messaged Eric a few weeks ago?"

No, mom, I forgot about the first time Dad had talked to us since he left 20 years ago. "Yeah, did he message him again or something?"

"No, his new wife messaged him."

"Wait, what? Why?"

"She told Eric that he should never come visit his dad. That he is a liar and that he hits her. She said that I was smart to get out when I did."

"Are you serious? Holy shit. Is that stuff true? Was dad like that?"

"He never hit me, but he did lie. All the time. He told me he grew up in a completely different town than he really did. He would tell me about cars that he never owned. He never wanted me to meet his family or friends, I think because he knew that the truth would come out. I never understood it. He would lie about the dumbest things, anything. He was such a weirdo."

After she hangs up, I sit and think about the "weirdo" for some time. I think about him sitting in that kitchen chair, faceless and shape-shifting, holding down the trigger on the controller for his slot car. The humming returns and I lay across the hardwood floor, racing him.

§

Rose Colored Glasses

Elly Eveland

The heart. In technical terms, this is just an organ that keeps us alive and breathing. It's the thing that keeps pumping blood through our veins and oxygen into our lungs. Some say that it is the core of the body, the one thing we could not do without. With each beat of the heart, we have one more second of precious life to call our own. It is a force that perseveres and keeps going, fighting to keep us alive. The heart controls the very flow of our inner bodies. However, this is just the heart's medical, physical job. The heart goes way beyond the control of the blood flow through our veins. The heart is what holds our deepest desires and passionate loves. It's where we keep our heavy feelings and our darkest secrets. It can jump into our throats when we experience a moment of panic or plummet to our stomachs when we feel horror or dread. The heart can make us do things we never thought we'd ever do. It is a seductive temptress, urging us to reach our desires and hold onto them tightly. The heart can lead us to what we desire most or it can burn like fire and leave us nursing the wound. It is a fickle friend and not one that can be trusted.

These lessons I have learned not from reading or writing about them, but through my own experience. Before I fully let myself be lead forward by my heart, I was a very different person than I am today. I was one of those people who relied on their raw emotions more than they should. I took what I was feeling at face value and ran with it. I let myself completely trust my heart and was ruled by how it made me feel. I look at the girl I used to be and scoff at how naive and weak she was. I have been badly burned by my own heart and it is something that I will never be able to forget. This is not only because the memory haunts me, but because I still bear the scars from wounds.

She looked at her phone, waiting with bated breath for it to ring. He told her that he would call tonight after everyone went to bed. She pictured the conversation over and over in her mind, making sure she didn't miss anything. He did say that, right? He said he would call her. Right? She was positive that was how the talk had gone. So then, where was he? Why hadn't he called yet? It had been hours since they had last spoken and it was getting later and later.

She kept glancing at the digital alarm clock on her nightstand, her heart sinking a little more with each passing minute. She wanted to see him so badly, needed to see him. It had been days and she had been waiting for this night for a long time. If something went wrong and she didn't get to fulfill her wishes, she would be crushed. She knew she was being ridiculous, but she couldn't help it. What she felt for him was far beyond anything she had ever experienced with anyone else. It was a longing that filled her up inside and clung to her with everything it had. It almost made her feel crazy at times, but she loved every second. Being with him was like nothing else. She just couldn't get enough and there was never enough to go around. Her appetite for him was an insatiable desire that clawed at her heart with everything it had. She knew that he was the one and no one could ever tell her differently.

The book she had been reading to quell the anticipation inside of her dropped from her hands as her phone lit up with his name. She snatched it up, took a breath, and answered with deliberate calmness.

"Hey! How's it going?"

As their short conversation began, she could tell

that he was about to tell her good news. His mother had finally fallen asleep and she would be able to drive to his house in twenty minutes. Her heart soared as she lit up with happiness at the turn her night had made. She told him that she would see him soon and ran to brush her teeth.

She was so excited to see him and she made sure that she was looking her best, wearing clothes she knew he loved. Everything that had gone wrong tonight, all the anticipation and anxiety that he maybe would tell her no didn't matter anymore. All she could think of was seeing him and getting to his house as fast as she could. It didn't matter that it was 1:37 a.m. It didn't matter that she would have to sneak into his house like an embarrassment. It didn't matter that she would only have a little over an hour with him. All that mattered was that she would be in his arms, her most cherished place in the world.

She got into her car and sped to his house, making sure there were no cops along the way. Houses and stores flashed by her, unknowing of the happiness that swelled inside her like a balloon. She entered his subdivision and, already, her mouth was dry and her breathing had quickened. She could barely suppress her excitement. As she neared his street, she slowed down to a crawl and killed her headlights. She had to park way down his street so none of his family would see or hear her car and become aware of what was happening.

This was the process that had been going on for over a year, each night she finally was able to see him. His family could never know that she was there in the wee hours of the morning, sneaking in through the front door and holding her breath while she slipped out. She hated that things had to be this way, but not enough to keep her from coming back to him, each time.

She got out of her car and called him to let him know that she was there. He told her that he would be waiting at the front door and she carefully shut her car door, trying to make as little noise as possible. She took her shoes off on the walk down his block so they wouldn't click on the tile in the foyer and made the trek in her socks. When she reached the door to his house, she waited patiently outside as he cracked the door open as slowly and silently as he possibly could. She slipped inside, hoping that her pounding heart wasn't audible to the others in the house. He motioned for her to go upstairs to his room and she lightly ran up the carpeted steps, flinging her body into his room and quietly as she could. She hid behind his door until he came up in case his brother came out of the room next door and saw her. Finally, after a few anxiety choked seconds, he entered his room and shut the door.

Although they were safe, they could not turn the light on, in case someone saw it under the crack of his threshold. The room was lit with the soft glow of his black light and everything seemed to be toned down and coated in shadow. All the familiar things in his room were still there, right down to the picture of them at Winter Formal that she had given him for Valentine's Day. That was back when they had been a couple and able to be together at times other than these quick, passionate nights. Even though they had been broken up for seven months, she still loved him with that same fire that had burned then. Nothing could extinguish the feelings that burned and glowed in her heart, like embers in a bonfire. It was her most desperate desire to be back together with him, something she thought about every day. No matter how many times he told her how much he still loved her too, he never made the commitment to be with her. He always told her that he loved her

and that it would happen one day, but he wasn't ready yet. And, even though this killed a little piece of her to hear, she kept coming back to him, keeping their late night visits going because it was all she had.

He turned to her and their eyes locked, gazing at each other with desire and love that burned deep within. He took her in his arms and held her close to him. As soon as he touched her skin, she could feel an electric shock sweep through her body, claiming her as its own. Her breath caught in her throat and she soaked in every little bit of him that she could, yearning for more. He tilted her head up to look at him and leaned down to kiss her deeply and passionately, never letting go of her body. Somehow, they made their way to his bed and fell upon it, touching every part of each other as fiery passion took over.

They lied together on his bed, limbs entangled in each other and bodies as close as they could be. For a while, they didn't say anything. They just held each other, breathing as one and wrapped up tight in their love. However, despite the euphoria she was feeling at being in his arms, there was a troubling question that was playing on the edge of her lips. She had heard rumors that there was someone else that he had been seeing. She dared not believe it until she asked him, but at the same time, she was terrified of the answer. Finally, as the tension rose inside her, she could take it no longer and sat up. She looked around at him, at the boy she loved more than anything, and asked him what she had been fearing the most.

"I have to ask you something. Please just tell me if it's true. Have you been seeing someone else?"

He looked at her with a mixture of shock and sadness. And, as she met his gaze, she knew before he said anything that it was true. Her heart sank and she braced herself for his answer.

"Well…yes. But, I don't feel about her how I feel about you! And, this just started with her."

She felt as though someone had ripped her heart out of her chest and flung it against a brick wall, repeatedly. Her whole world was crumbling and she was powerless to stop it. Her eyes filled with tears as she looked at the boy she loved who had just betrayed her so deeply.

"Are you going to date her? Are you going to actually be with her?"

"I don't know. Maybe. I'm not really thinking about that right now."

Even though his answer was something that didn't sound too bad, his eyes deceived him. She could tell that he was going to be with this girl and that he had just been using her for these past seven months. He was just too much of a coward to say it to her. She felt as though she might throw up and suddenly had to get out of his house.

"I can't see you anymore. This has to end. It's too painful for me to just see you at night and watch you be with someone else."

To her surprise, he didn't deny this or try to convince her otherwise. They both rose and left his room, sneaking down the stairs. When they got to the front door, he kissed her again and looked at her, sadly. She turned away from him and left, her heart broken into millions of pieces that would take her two years to put back together.

As I look back on this time in my life, I'm ashamed of what I once was. I look at that girl and I am angry with her. I hate that I let my emotions control me so much and that I let myself be used by someone. I rarely think about him anymore and I'm very happy about it. Within the last year, I was finally able to say to myself

without lying that I was completely over him and that I had no interest in ever being with him again. This is a huge deal to me and has taken me a long time to arrive at. However, despite my embarrassment of how I acted with this guy, I have learned a few things about the heart. It is something that cannot be fully trusted and we should not rely completely on what it tells us. I used to listen to what my heart was telling me and I ended up with nothing but broken pieces. When it comes to emotions, we need to really evaluate the situation and make the decision based on what is best for us. The heart can guide us toward the right answer, but we can't throw ourselves into something just because of what we feel. Emotions are fleeting and they can change at the drop of a hat. If we listen entirely to what the heart tells us, we don't use our better judgment and end up hurting ourselves.

After this kind of an experience, I have become a little more jaded, this I can see. However, being jaded is not always such a bad thing. It means that you can see the world for what it really is and assess situations with more logic. I can take the lessons I have learned from this and apply them to new situations. We all need to sweep the denial away from our eyes and see things for what they actually are. No matter how much it hurts, we need to put the heart in perspective and look at what is really going on. Of course, there is love in the world and passion, but we need to make decisions about them based on what the circumstance is really about. The heart will always continue to beat for as long as we are living, but that is the only part of it that is constant.

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Sounds of Familiarity

Megan Mann

In 1935, Ernest was #55 on the top 100 most popular baby names for boys. By 2008, it wasn't even within the top 100. In 73 years, that name went from being relatively popular to all but obsolete; antiquated. It was a name that you would hear and think, "That sounds like someone's grandpa's name" with its note of antiquity. In 23 years, that name has come to mean more than just a name on a registry. For me, that name rings bells and sometimes sings me to sleep.

Symphony

The first handheld camera was made popular in 1871. However, it wasn't until 1888 that the portable camera created by Kodak became popular. It contained a single shutter speed and had a fixed-focus lens. It was reasonably priced therefore making it accessible to consumers. There was enough film in this camera for 100 exposures. When the roll was done, one would send the film back to the factory for processing. By the end of the 19th century, Kodak had expanded to include various models and was looking onward to the next century.

It was in the 20th century that Ernest Bakajza discovered the power of the camera. He captured photos of movie star Debbie Reynolds' 21st birthday. He snapped shots of those that served with and among him in the air force during the Korean Conflict for Stars and Stripes Magazine. When his oldest son, middle son and finally his daughter were born, he photographed their accomplishments, their proms and his daughter's wedding (the only one among his children to be married). Then his grandchildren came. First my brother, then me and my sister rounded out our trio. His camera froze our cherubic faces covered in buttercream when it was still acceptable on our birthdays. There wasn't a single dance recital that I didn't see that flash going off. At t-ball games, those ill-fated soccer years, our sleeping states no matter the age; they're all there. Even if it wasn't his camera that produced a photo, he would appreciate the artistry of another's.

"You look just like your grandma when I met her," he'd say with a catch in his voice.

Every camera with its popping bulb, nearly every photo, rolls of forgotten or damaged film, negatives of so many lives lay lifeless in a tiny dark room in the house he built; never to be touched by those calloused hands again.

Pop

On April 17, 1897, Reverend Benedict Rajcany arrived in Whiting, Indiana from Slovakia. He was hoping for an area that had progressed to more than just a few farmhouses and a great deal of wilderness. But that wasn't going to stop him. After a town meeting, the patrons decided to turn the small meeting hall into a church. It was dedicated to St. John the Baptist on July 4th of that same year and later was turned into a small school for seven or eight boys to learn English in the back room of the rectory. In May of 1930, the town broke ground for construction of the new church. Today, the church consists of around 4,200 parishioners and stands as a beacon to the whole town.

It was the church he had attended from the time he was born until he was placed in front of the altar. He placed a heavy emphasis on religion. All of his children attended the school until they moved on to high school. It was the place where all three of his grandchildren were baptized. When I was little, I remember not being able to pay attention whatsoever to what was happening.

My mother would slip me a snack or a coloring book to keep me quiet. When she wasn't successful in keeping any of us quiet, he would give us a look and we would know that it was time to quiet down. If he had to shush you, you knew it was trouble. He was incredibly loving, but he knew just how to put enough fear into you.

I couldn't go with him to church because it was like Cheers for him. Everyone knew his name and they were always glad that he came. Even in church, a place he had devoted his free time to, he knew how to crack a joke that might be construed as inappropriate.

No one ever questioned his devotion to the church. He believed faith defined who you were and dictated how you lived. The murals on the walls, the statues situated around the floor, the stain-glassed windows that let in multicolor light when it was bright out show his round face. They remind me to always do good for others otherwise Jesus won't be happy. They remind me that if I'm bad, there aren't going to be pearly gates, only hellfire and brimstone. They remind me of pretty dresses and bows in my hair and when I didn't understand the finite nature of things. Mostly it reminds me of hands I'll never see brought together in prayer or hear his voice say "Peace be with you" again. I guess that's why I avoid it.

Amen

The first porcelain dentures were created in 1770 by Alexis Duchateau. The patent for those was granted to his former assistant, Nicholas Dubois De Chemant which allowed him to create a single row or a complete set and included the necessary tools for fastening them to one's mouth. He began selling these in 1792 with most of his porcelain paste being provided by Wedgwood, a pottery firm.

Papa was never really good at wearing his teeth. He lost his teeth to gum disease long before I was born. For most of my life, I could hardly remember him ever really having them in. You could never tell. His face was round enough and pudgy enough and his beard bushy enough for you to hardly notice. Sure, he wore them to church or an event where not wearing your teeth is frowned upon, but at home, they were always in a glass. Sometimes I would look at the food on his plate and wonder how gumming it down was going to work. Maybe he was just portly enough to not necessitate fully chewing his food. Maybe he had a method to it.

Maybe he just wanted to have a smile completely unique to him.

Chomp

December 24th is considered one of the most culturally significant celebrations in both the Western world and all of Christendom, where it is widely seen as a partial or full holiday. It is the night that precedes the birth of Jesus Christ and is typically celebrated by Christians and Catholics by attending Midnight Mass. For most, however, it is the night when cookies and milk are left out for Santa, children dream of dancing sugarplums and parents race to strategically place wrapped gifts claiming to be from a man in a bright red suit.

Christmas Eve was always stressful. Because his new wife (a woman who at the time of his death had been married to him for less time than my parents had been married, so step-grandmother works) insisted they spend Christmas Day with her family, we were meant to spend Christmas Eve at their house.

Every year, we would cart in a box almost as big as me baring a new animatronic Santa Claus that would have to fight for space amongst his oddly dressed twins singing carols or falling into chimneys that we had bought the year before. And the year before that. And

every year since 1989 when I celebrated my first Christmas in that house. By the time I was a teenager, it was hard for any of us to walk around. As we grew older, my brother's lack of hair was always brought up causing him to flush with embarrassment. My Technicolor locks were never appropriate. My sister was developing too quickly. When my grandma moved in next door, I would race over there seeking solace from the not so cheery tidings. We were never as spectacular as his wife's cookie-cutter, fake as a breast implant, future stepford wives granddaughters in her eyes and I was sick of hearing it.

Despite the decline of his health those last few years, I don't know if it was the undivided attention to just his kids and grandkids or the tradition of it all that now makes December 24th feel hollow.

Ho! Ho! Ho!

The first case of pneumonia was recorded by Hippocrates. The description we now know of was created in the 12th century by Maimonides. Pneumonia affects over 450 million people a year and results in about 4 million deaths annually. It is an inflammatory condition of the lung usually caused by an infection with a virus or bacteria. Typical symptoms tend to include a cough, chest pain, fever and difficulty breathing. It is preventable by vaccines and appropriate treatment of other health problems. It can cause respiratory failure that results from a combination of infection and inflammatory response.

2006 brought a new accessory to Papa's life. Everywhere he went, he was accompanied by an oxygen tank rolling behind him. His health had begun to fail and was told that if he didn't invest, his time was about to be cut short. So the tank became an extension of his person. At home, he would do all he could to avoid wearing it. He would hold out as long as he could until you could be a room away and hear him breathing. Maybe three hotdogs and two orders of French fries and never turning down a meal wasn't helping, but he said he would never deny himself what tasted good.

By 2008, he could barely stand without struggling. He still wore his gummy smile and his piercing blue eyes still knew how to comfort or instill fear in you. Knowing how hectic everyone's schedule had become, we decided to take him out for an early birthday dinner. He laughed his hearty laugh that would make his rotund middle wobble, that would push his cheeks up so that his eyes were barely visible, that would fill a room. He enjoyed every bite of the scallops he was proud of me for knowing all about. When he hobbled away with his accessory crunching gravel in the parking lot, I knew it was going to the last time I was going to see him alive.

A week later he was admitted to the hospital with pneumonia. He was hardly conscious for those last few days. My parents and two uncles were at the hospital at all times in the event that he would wake up. They tried to rid his lungs of the liquid that was threatening to drown him miles from any body of water, but it was useless. Papa knew it, too. Instead of treading water, he decided to ride the wave. He passed away on a Monday, St. Patrick's day, three days before his 74th birthday.

It was the only flood I could never help to repair the damage of.

Crash

The process of cremation can go back as long as 20,000 years ago in Australia. In Europe, there are traces of cremation dating back to the Bronze Age. As it appeared around 12th century BC, it appeared to be influenced from practices in Minor Asia. In Ancient Greece and Rome, it was typically only used for the upper

classes and imperial families. While it is generally done in a crematorium in the modern age and much more common than in ancient times, open-air cremation is still popular in countries such as Nepal and India.

There was a viewing a few days later followed by a funeral mass the next day in the church that I hadn't stepped foot in since I was a child. Those two days were the only days that I'd ever seen my perpetually angry uncle and annoyingly jovial uncle cry. A funeral home isn't my favorite place and not having much experience with one had me sitting in the back of the room and not for long. People I had never met or couldn't remember would come up to me and apologize for loss. They would ask me how I was doing or how I was feeling. You want to scream that the sadness you feel is like a chasm that keeps getting wider and threatening to swallow you, but you have to save face. If I was going to keep up my façade, I couldn't hang around.

The next day, I sat in the second section of pews with my grandma rows and rows behind everyone else. I looked around at those same murals and statues and stain-glassed windows trying not to focus on the box holding only a shell of a staple of my first 18 years.

Only each one pulled me back to that box in front of that white marble altar. Collapsing onto my grandma's lap, the deluge of tears exploded from my eyes. There wouldn't be any photos of my graduation in a few short months, there would be no more threats of being smited by God for misbehaving, I wouldn't see that gummy smile anymore, another singing Santa wouldn't be purchased, I couldn't go back and tell him that that bulky tank was clearly a lady magnet.

All the hopes of him being present at my wedding one day or teaching me more about cameras were turned into ash later that day. Every trace of his plump shape was burned away. He was turned from a human being to decoration on the mantelpiece.

Silence

People are a collection of sounds, an opus specific to who they were. We may be slow-building to a terrific crescendo, a flowing melody or a strange cacophony that hardly makes sense, but we are all that collection of sounds; each person a soundtrack to one another's lives.

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Photo: Paula Johnson

Writers Unblocked is published annually by
The Department of English and Philosophy and
The Department of Communication and Creative Arts
Purdue University Calumet
Hammond, IN 46323